

ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM

I'll do anything to
become a librarian!

Part 5 Avatar of a Goddess
Vol.11

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Illustrator: **You Shiina**







Cast of Characters

Summary of Part Four:

At the Royal Academy, Rozemyne has become both a problem child and a top-ranking student. She took ownership of the library's magic tools through a blessing, played affter against a greater duchy, advised royalty on matters of romance, defeated a Darkness feybeast, and healed the Ehrenfest gathering spot, among so many other things. Meanwhile, at the guidance of the Sovereign knight commander, who knows that Ferdinand is a seed of Adalgisa, the king orders Ferdinand to leave Ehrenfest and marry into another duchy. Now, Ferdinand must endure a new life in Ahrensbach.



Wilfried

Sylvester's son, Rozemyne's older brother, and a fourth-year.



Rozemyne

The protagonist. Divine intervention means she now looks old enough to have come of age, but she's the same on the inside and will do anything to read books. A fourth-year.

Ehrenfest's Archducal Family



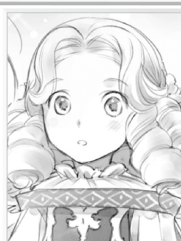
Sylvester

The archduke of Ehrenfest. He adopted Rozemyne, making him her adoptive father.



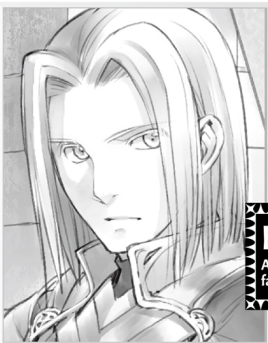
Florencia

Sylvester's wife and the mother of his three children. Rozemyne's adoptive mother.



Charlotte

Sylvester's daughter, Rozemyne's little sister, and a third-year.



Melchior

Sylvester's son. Rozemyne's little brother.

Bonifatius

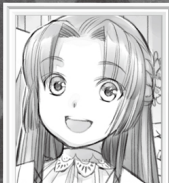
Sylvester's uncle, Karstedt's father, and Rozemyne's grandfather.

Ferdinand

A member of the Ehrenfest archducal family. Sent to Ahrensbach by royal decree.

**Otilie**

Head attendant.
Hartmut's mother.

**Bertilde**

A first-year apprentice
archattendant.
Brunhilde's little sister.

**Lieseleta**

Angelica's little sister
and a medattendant.

**Gretia**

A fifth-year apprentice
medattendant. Gave her
name.

**Hartmut**

An archscholar and
the new High Priest.
Otilie's son.

**Clarissa**

An archscholar.
Engaged to Hartmut.

**Roderick**

A fourth-year apprentice
medscholar. Gave his
name.

**Philine**

A fourth-year apprentice
layscholar.

**Cornelius**

Karstedt's son and an
archknight.

**Leonore**

An archknight.
Engaged to Cornelius.

**Angelica**

Lieseleta's older sister
and a medknight.

**Matthias**

A medknight. Gave his
name.

**Laurenz**

A fifth-year apprentice
medknight. Gave his
name.

**Judithe**

A fifth-year apprentice
medknight.

**Damuel**

A layknight.

Rozemyne's Retainers

Sovereign Affiliates

Trauerqual.....The Zent.
Ralfrieda.....The Zent's first wife.
Magdalena.....The Zent's third wife.
Sigiswald.....The first prince.
Adolphine.....Sigiswald's first wife.
Anastasius.....The second prince.
Eglantine.....Anastasius's wife.
Hildebrand.....The third prince and Magdalena's son.
Raublut.....The Sovereign knight commander.
Solange.....A medlibrarian of the Royal Academy.
Schwartz.....A library magic tool.
Weiss.....A library magic tool.
Immanuel.....The Sovereign High Bishop.

Gods



Mestionora

The Goddess of Wisdom.
Wind subordinate.



Erwaermen

A former god.
The white tree.

Ehrenfest's Nobility



Brunhilde

Rozemyne's former
retainer and Sylvester's
fiancée.



Rihyarda

Sylvester's
archattendant.

Karstedt

.....Ehrenfest's knight commander. Rozemyne's noble father.

Elvira

.....Karstedt's first wife. Rozemyne's noble mother.

Eckhart

.....Ferdinand's guard knight. Karstedt's son.

Justus

.....Ferdinand's attendant and scholar. Rihyarda's son.

Lasfam

.....Ferdinand's layattendant.

Dunkelfelger's Nobility

Sieglinde.....The archduke's first wife.
Lestilaut.....An archducal family member and the next archduke.
Hannelore.....A fourth-year archduke candidate.
Heisshtize.....An archknight.

Others

Gervasio.....The king of Lanzenave.

Ahrensbach's Nobility

Georgine

.....Ahrensbach's first wife. Sylvester's older sister.

Detlinde

.....A member of the Ahrensbach archducal family.
Georgine's daughter.

Letizia

.....A member of the Ahrensbach archducal family.

Alstede

.....An archnoble. Detlinde's elder sister and Georgine's daughter.

Strahl

.....Ferdinand's archknight. Formerly the knight commander.

Sergius

.....Ferdinand's archattendant.

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Prologue

The door to the Ehrenfest Dormitory's meeting room opened, and the archducal family left one by one, having finished eating dinner and sharing their intelligence. Their retainers awaited them in the hallway outside, having taken their meals in the dining hall. It was time for the attendants who had served the archducal family during the meeting and the knights who had guarded them to eat.

"Ferdinand—you're going back to the villa now, right? The fight is over; be sure to rest tonight instead of overdoing it again."

"The same goes for you. Rest well tonight so you can memorize your lines and practice your whirling tomorrow."

As Rozemyne and Ferdinand said their farewells, so did Charlotte and Florencia. The archducal couple would be returning to the castle.

"I shall entrust the dormitory's arrangements to you, Charlotte. Contact us if you run into any trouble. We have ordered the scholars to immediately relay any messages sent from the dormitory."

"Certainly, Mother. You may count on me. Sister, let us return to our rooms together."

Charlotte and Rozemyne returned to the staircase in the entrance hall, the latter swathed in silver cloth and being carried by Angelica. Their retainers followed after them.

Ferdinand went in the same direction, intending to pass through the entrance hall to the central building, but his attendant Lasfam intervened. "Lord Ferdinand, could you spend the night here instead? I shall, um... take care of the cleanup tomorrow. So that I might return home."

Lasfam had been summoned to the dormitory early in the morning and told to prepare a room for Ferdinand. But when the man in question had arrived, he had ordered that the preparations be undone and that Lasfam return home, as he planned to stay in the villa when he was not eating. One could understand the attendant wanting to serve his lord again—the two had been apart

for well over a year—but he would never normally have acted on that desire. That he was questioning his orders implied an external influence, which made Ferdinand furrow his brow.

“Surely spending one night here would not pose any issues,” Justus interjected with a shrug. “If one wishes to trap the subordinates of the karfins, one must first give them an opening.”

Karfins were the animal used in Ahrensbach’s crest, and being their subordinates meant being loyal to the duchy’s previous archducal family. Ferdinand understood the importance of testing them—he had already set up a touchstone to see how they would act—but Justus’s intervention was far too purposeful. What exactly was he planning?

“Not to mention, it seems *he* has something he wishes to keep secret from his lady...” Justus said, pointing. Hartmut had fallen behind Rozemyne’s retinue and was looking in their direction.

“Ferdinand, if you want to converse in secret, then go to your room,” Sylvester said with a grin. “I asked Lasfam to prepare it for a reason.” He gave Ferdinand a slap on the shoulder, then said, “Don’t waste our goodwill, alright?”

Ferdinand swallowed the urge to say that an archduke should remain more on guard and draw firmer lines in the sand. He was no longer an Ehrenfest noble; he had already left to perform administrative work in another duchy. On the one hand, he wished that Sylvester would acknowledge those facts and treat him as he should any outsider... but on the other, he was pleased—touched, even—that his elder brother still trusted him enough to treat him as a compatriot.

“Very well...” Ferdinand replied at length. “But only to hear whatever Hartmut has to say.”

He glared at all those present, then climbed the dormitory’s stairs instead of returning to the villa. The second-floor hallway was lined with rooms for men. There were shared rooms for laynobles and mednobles at the north end, and chambers for the archducal family and their retainers at the south. The southeast room was the largest and meant for the archduke, while the one beside it was meant for the heir apparent.

Ever since his time at the Royal Academy, Ferdinand had stayed in the southwest room opposite the archduke’s. That same room had been prepared for him again. He went inside and found it comfortably warm; the fireplace was lit, and firewood crackled

within. Lasfam would never have done something so wasteful when Ferdinand did not intend to stay the night. Justus was evidently determined that his lord not return to the villa.

Ferdinand glared at his impudent retainer, who merely shrugged and smiled in response.

Good grief...

“Lasfam, if you would prepare some tea,” Justus said. “Eckhart and I shall eat in the retainer room.”

“Certainly.”

Hartmut gazed curiously around the room while the eager attendant happily started serving his lord. He could not enter Rozemyne’s chambers on the third floor, so he had probably spent a lot of time wondering what it was like inside.

“Sit,” Ferdinand said.

Hartmut did as instructed, and Lasfam poured them both some tea. Ferdinand took a sip and immediately felt the tension drain from his shoulders.

“Now then,” he continued, “what do you wish to discuss?”

“Lady Rozemyne’s attendants. It was said that they need only a bell to get ready, but could their transfer be delayed until tomorrow? Thanks to the materials Rihyarda and the others have prepared, Lady Rozemyne will not be inconvenienced even if she needs to wait for her attendants to return. Moving at night is dangerous.”

“It will not be easy to move them at this time, but the sooner it is done, the better,” Ferdinand replied, tapping his temple.

“Rozemyne’s attendants are not trained in combat; leaving them in Ahrensbach is more dangerous than the alternative. You understand that, surely.”

According to a report, nobles in Ahrensbach’s castle were attempting to take Rozemyne’s attendants hostage as leverage. They were part of the faction supporting Detlinde, to no one’s surprise. Ferdinand intended to observe them and those who worked to suppress them before deciding how to treat Ahrensbach’s nobles moving forward, but there was a problem—if any harm came to Rozemyne’s retainers in the process, she would go berserk and make things drastically more troublesome for everyone. That was why Ferdinand wanted to extract her retainers from the castle posthaste.

Hartmut shook his head. “Lady Letizia and her retainers are

keeping them safe in the northern building. Surely it must be safer for them to spend the rest of the night there. Even if guards are assigned to help with their move, the knights who stayed in Ahrensbach's castle can hardly be trusted. Attempting to mobilize them sounds far too risky."

Before heading to the Royal Academy to capture Detlinde, Ferdinand had rid his group of her allies and those reluctant to obey his orders. Such undesirables had been told to stay in Ahrensbach's castle, hence Hartmut's concern that the knights stationed there could not be trusted. Hartmut had also questioned the prisoners in the Adalgisa villa, which must have contributed to his concern.

"Cornelius and I will travel to Ahrensbach tomorrow to fetch our things," Hartmut continued. "We can escort the attendants on our way back."

"Do as you please, then."

Ferdinand saw no reason to drag the matter out any further; he was busy enough preparing for the upcoming meeting with the royal family and the ceremony that would succeed it. He was being considerate only because he did not want Rozemyne to become emotional. Her retainers would solve their problems on their own.

"Care to tell me the *true* reason you are here?" Ferdinand asked. "I doubt that was your main concern."

"It was of equal importance, considering how deeply Lady Rozemyne cares about her retainers," Hartmut said with a wry smile. He sipped his tea and exhaled. Then he retrieved some fey paper from the folds of his clothes and cast stylo to create a pen. "I wish to know more about passing on the Grutrissheit. I checked the Sovereign temple's records with that priest, Curtiss, but found nothing of relevance. There were records about the Zent's coronation ceremonies, but not a single mention of a divine avatar performing a dedication whirl to grant a new Zent the Grutrissheit."

"As expected. Only once in Yurgenschmidt's long history has the royal family lost the Grutrissheit, and there is no precedent for a divine avatar granting them one anew." Becoming the Zent had originally required candidates to obtain the Book of Mestionora through their own power, and those who wished to take the throne had competed to see who could fill their Book with the most knowledge. A religious ceremony wherein a divine avatar simply bestowed the Grutrissheit upon someone defeated the whole purpose of the crown.

“In that case, what manner of ceremony are you envisioning? I was told you want Lady Rozemyne to whirl, but what will the ceremony entail and what will it hope to achieve?”

Ferdinand nodded, satisfied that Hartmut was simply embracing the artificial nature of the ceremony. “Upon her entrance, Rozemyne shall whirl to make the Zent selection circle shine and open the path to the Garden of Beginnings. She will go there, return, and grant the Grutrisheit to the new Zent as the Divine Avatar of Mestionora. The ceremony will conclude with the new Zent displaying the Grutrisheit to those present, mirroring the coronation ceremony in its details. I intend to convey all this precisely following our meeting with the royal family.”

The precise details of the ceremony could not yet be finalized; they would probably change based on who was chosen to become the new Zent. Ferdinand considered the potential candidates and sighed, worrying that things might not go as he expected. Then he shook his head and reassured himself that they would. Never again would the royal family treat him, Rozemyne, or Ehrenfest as their pawns.

Hartmut was busy writing everything down when his eyes suddenly narrowed. “It might be confusing from a historical perspective if we call this a coronation ceremony. It is unprecedented and unlikely to be performed again, so perhaps we should instead go with ‘the gifting ceremony’ or something similar to distinguish it from traditional coronations.”

Ferdinand nodded. It was an astute observation—exactly what one would expect of someone who had just recently scoured the Sovereign temple’s records. He decided that calling it the “transference ceremony” would do. The name meant painfully little to him.

“The objective of this ceremony is to fully activate the selection magic circle and revive the old process of choosing true Zents,” Ferdinand said. “We should also clear up the misconception that Detlinde managed to activate the circle. It pulsed and nothing more, meaning she failed. Yet some nobles still seem to consider her a proper Zent candidate.”

Those of lesser and middle duchies had few opportunities to associate with Detlinde and see her foolishness for themselves. They were also unable to argue against a greater duchy such as Ahrensbach or the Sovereign temple. Their misunderstandings

would need to be corrected.

“Furthermore,” he continued, “I wish to burn into the minds of other nobles Rozemyne’s divinity and abnormality. You will need to create an extreme environment to make them accept this unprecedented case of an underage woman becoming aub.” He omitted the fact that he was drawing attention to Rozemyne’s divinity to hide that the Gruttrissheit the new Zent would receive was merely a magic tool.

“I understand your goals and fervently agree with them,” Hartmut said, his eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. “I shall arrange a performance that leaves no doubt that Lady Rozemyne is a flawless divine avatar.”

Ferdinand gave his temple a few contemplative taps. Hartmut’s intensity was a little concerning, but overseeing his management of the ceremony would take too long. He could only hope for the best.

If Rozemyne finds it intolerable, she can intervene. She has Hartmut’s name for a reason.

With that settled, Ferdinand gave only a brief word of warning before completely erasing the preparations for the transference ceremony from his mind: “Take care not to overdo it. If your lady rejects the ritual, we will all pay the price. Is that all you wished to discuss?”

“Must you be in such a hurry?”

“Fine. Lasfam, if you would refresh our tea.”

Ferdinand would need to stay if they had other things to discuss. He requested more tea as Eckhart and Justus came in from the retainer room, having briskly finished their meal. They took the usual posts for scholars and guard knights.

“So, what were you discussing?” Justus asked.

“Nothing important,” Ferdinand replied. “Hartmut inquired about Rozemyne’s retainers in the castle and about the transference ceremony. You can ask Lasfam for the details later, if you so wish.”

“Nothing important?” Hartmut frowned. “I don’t agree in the slightest.”

“Important or not, I doubt they were enough to warrant leaving Rozemyne’s side and coming here to my room. Say what you came here to say.”

The casual grin vanished from Hartmut’s face. He stared at Ferdinand, the serious glint in his orange eyes a declaration that he would not be deceived. The sight made Ferdinand smile a little; in

the year and a half since his departure for Ahrensbach, Hartmut had grown considerably.

“Very well,” Hartmut said. “I wish to know precisely what impact the goddess’s descent had on Lady Rozemyne.”

“Did something happen?” Ferdinand asked.

“She has returned to her previous comfort level with her retainers. Leonore also informed me that she asked to use her highbeast rather than travel by foot.”

Ferdinand’s brow twitched, but he said nothing and signaled for Hartmut to continue.

“Lady Rozemyne proposed it as though it were obvious. Leonore said it was like she had forgotten all about her feystone phobia.”

“It is as I expected, then...” Rozemyne’s fear had persisted even in the thick of a dangerous battle; it was only natural that her retainers would notice something was wrong.

“So you are aware of her circumstances. In that case, I must ask that you tell me what happened.”

Ferdinand nodded. To explain the impact on Rozemyne’s mind, he thought back to his encounter with Mestionora in the Garden of Beginnings.

The Goddess of Wisdom had descended into Rozemyne, given Erwaermen a portion of her “heavenly power,” and then decided several matters pertaining to the selection of the next Zent.

“My work here is done, so I shall take my leave,” she said. “Call out to Myne if you want her to return.”

Took you long enough.

Ferdinand took great care not to speak the words that came to mind. Mestionora had seemed so disinterested in returning to the realm of the gods that he had feared Rozemyne would remain trapped there forever. He was relieved to hear that they could summon her back, but only for a moment; when she gazed upon Ferdinand, the corners of the goddess’s lips curved into an amused grin.

Sensing the malice in Mestionora’s eyes, Ferdinand tensed up. He was aware of just how much he had done to cross her.

If the myths passed down in Yurgenschmidt were true, then Mestionora owed everything to Erwaermen. He saved her mother and her subordinates from the clutches of her father, Ewigeliebe.

How could she feel anything but disdain toward someone like Ferdinand, who improperly barged into the Garden of Beginnings, received the Book of Mestionora, and then refused to dye the country's foundation? Yurgenschmidt's collapse from a lack of mana would cause Erwaermen to disappear with it, but even as time ran out, Ferdinand refused to dispatch Rozemyne and continually obstructed Gervasio.

"I would advise that Terza call out to Myne," Mestionora said. "Quinta's voice might not reach her anymore."

Ferdinand could endure the goddess's light Crushing... but he could not stand the thought that her malice was being unjustly taken out on Rozemyne. As much as Mestionora claimed that Rozemyne had asked for her help to soothe Erwaermen's wrath, Ferdinand found it deeply suspicious. Rozemyne had expelled her mana to avoid it saturating her body. That was it. She had not prayed, nor had she cast a spell or drawn a magic circle. Mestionora had descended of her own free will; one needed only see how she gazed upon Erwaermen to realize her feelings for him.

I suspect she was desperate to descend upon the mortal realm, and Rozemyne served as a convenient excuse.

That said, it was also easy to imagine Rozemyne taking Mestionora's bait and giving up her body without a second thought.

Fool. Do not make promises without thinking them through!

Ferdinand balled his hands into fists, considering what Mestionora had meant when she had said that his voice might not reach Rozemyne. He recalled the price others had paid for calling upon the gods and inhaled sharply.

"What have you done to her?!"

Mestionora, who was still sitting on Erwaermen's shoulder, looked down at him quizzically. She had the same face as Rozemyne, but the way she acted made her seem like someone else entirely.

"I played with her mind to make her body easier to control, severing her connection to memories more important to her than her love of books. She was so overjoyed to be in my library that I might not have needed to, but"—Mestionora saw Ferdinand grimace and chuckled—"she *did* ask a goddess for help. Something of this nature cannot come without sacrifice."

Well... this could have gone worse.

Had the goddess tampered with anyone else, they might have

forgotten everything. Rozemyne, however, had an almost unbelievable obsession with books; there were few things she cared about more than reading. Ferdinand suspected she would return with her memory essentially untouched.

Mestionora concluded, "The voice of someone she has forgotten is unlikely to reach her in my library."

Is that to say she acted deliberately to sever Rozemyne's memories of me?

Mestionora must have truly loathed Ferdinand. At least Rozemyne prayed on a regular basis and Gervasio was dedicated to becoming the Zent. Even so, Ferdinand resented that Rozemyne was being wrapped up in the goddess's petty revenge.

"Is there a way to repair memories that have been severed...?" he asked.

"If someone she has forgotten channels mana into her, her memories of them will return. Not that I think she would allow it. How would she react to someone she cannot even remember forcing his mana into her? You believe in the importance of permission, do you not?"

Ferdinand tapped his temple. The goddess was snidely alluding to his protest when she had moved to grant Erwaermen her heavenly power.

"Do you really think Myne will trust a stranger?" Mestionora sneered. "What if she declines to remember you? Will you force your mana into her? Or will you attempt to convey the severed memories while pleading with her to accept it? Surely you would not be so brutish as to channel your mana into her without permission."

Is this the worst she can do? The most her malice can muster?

In truth, such threats were barely worth considering. Ferdinand had already used a synchronization potion and some liquid mana to dye Rozemyne without explaining anything to her; to restore her memories, he would not hesitate to channel mana into her without permission. If she called him a brute for it, so be it. He did not care. His only focus was gathering intelligence.

"Is there a way to restore someone's memories *without* channeling mana into them?" Ferdinand asked.

"Goodness! Do you think I would tell you?"

Hah. So there is.

Otherwise, Mestionora would have been quick to thrust her

victory in his face. Ferdinand tried to recall any methods for countering the curses and tricks of the divine, and the stern expression this produced seemed to satisfy the goddess.

“Quinta... would you rather she remembers you or has forgotten you?” she asked with a venomous smile before finally returning to the world of the gods. Rozemyne’s body slowly came down from Erwaermen’s shoulder.

“Rozemyne!” Ferdinand exclaimed. He rushed over to embrace her, then grimaced; she had been completely dyed. Worse still, she was radiating divine mana—human mana containing divine power—that seemed to reject the touch of all others. Mestionora was gone, but it felt like Rozemyne had yet to return.

“Rozemyne, can you hear me?” he called, his frustration growing. There was no response.

If the goddess had told the truth, then Ferdinand could be sure that Rozemyne no longer remembered him. He took her hand and tried to channel mana into her, but it was pushed back. Not long ago, a synchronization potion and some liquid mana had been enough to dye her completely. Now, the goddess’s descent had made his mana more like a foreign element that needed to be guarded against.

Despicable...

Re-dyeing her mana would have been trivial with the aid of another synchronization potion, but Ferdinand had not thought to bring one; they served no purpose in battle. Angry at both Mestionora for creating the predicament and Rozemyne for carelessly surrendering her body to a goddess, he gripped his schtappe and increased the force behind his mana.

“Rozemyne, come back already...”

Ferdinand noticed the faint sensation of their mana connecting. It steadily expanded as he poured more mana into her. But even then, Rozemyne did not respond.

Will this connection really bring back her memories? Could it be that Mestionora wants to keep her in the world of the gods?

Harrowing thoughts swirled through his mind. He tried to remember some other way to make Rozemyne’s mana easier to dye, at which point he heard Erwaermen respond to Gervasio.

“Mestionora wanted all three of you to compete. The will of a goddess is best followed, so let us wait and see whether Quinta gets through to her.”

The gods did not lie; they focused only on the promises made between them and mankind. History had proven that time and time again. Even the malicious goddess would uphold her end of the bargain.

In which case, I can only keep calling out to Rozemyne while channeling my mana into her.

Ferdinand was steeling his resolve when he suddenly remembered something crucial: Rozemyne was in the goddess's library, unable to think about anything more important than reading.

Do not tell me she is simply too focused on her books—that she is too distracted to hear my calls whether she remembers me or not.

Ferdinand could not tell whether her silence was due to severed memories or because she was just too busy reading. And in the goddess's library, there was no one to grab her by the shoulders or close her book. It seemed more and more likely that Rozemyne would not be able to return at all.

At once, Ferdinand put even more force into his mana, completely overpowering the rebound.

“Rozemyne! Rozemyne...!”

“Eep! Wh-What’s going on?!” she suddenly exclaimed, her goofy tone making it exceptionally clear that she had simply been too focused on reading to hear anyone.

Ferdinand was more angry than relieved. “So you finally heard me... Get back here. *Now*. If you linger, all that you care about will disappear.”

“Eep! O goddess, return my body to me! Ferdinand sounds angry!”

Rozemyne's startled cry echoed through his head, but he did not hear Mestionora's response. Instead, everything went quiet.

Ferdinand continued to channel mana into Rozemyne, unable to relax until she woke up. Or, to be more precise, until she behaved in a way that distinguished her as Rozemyne, not Mestionora.

The more I think about it, the more it irritates me.

Still, Ferdinand would gain nothing from getting annoyed at Mestionora for descending upon the mortal world and doing as she pleased or at Rozemyne for failing to understand the enormity of their situation. Unfortunate though it was, they were already involved with the gods.

Ferdinand put his memories of the recent catastrophe aside and

met Hartmut's gaze. The scholar was still patiently awaiting an answer.

"I shall not say too much about the goddess," Ferdinand said. "There is extremely little that can be shared with someone incapable of visiting the Garden of Beginnings." Saying too much would reveal sensitive context to the warring between Zents, and it was bothersome just imagining how Hartmut would react to Mestionora using Rozemyne's body as she pleased.

"I must know whether Lady Rozemyne's memory is intact," Hartmut stressed. "We cannot risk burdening our lady through ignorance. I wish to hear as much as you can tell me."

Back when Rozemyne's feystone phobia first developed, not even she had noticed it. Hartmut and Lieseleta had sensed that something was amiss but lacked the time to investigate, which had resulted in their failure to react properly when their lady attempted to escape the postbattle celebration. They had chastised her, and she had seemed uncharacteristically tense around her retainers ever since. She would momentarily freeze whenever they called or take a cautious step back when they approached—minor details that did not impact her daily life but still stood out to Hartmut and Lieseleta. They deeply regretted not noticing her confusion in full or acting upon it.

"I understand how you feel..." Ferdinand replied. "In truth, not even I have a complete grasp on the situation."

Despite having followed the goddess's instructions and channeled mana into Rozemyne, Ferdinand could not tell whether he had restored all of her memories of him. He had participated in the battle that had brought about her fear of feystones, but now that fear was gone. Would it remain that way until she received the mana of the person most responsible? What if that person was deceased? How would manaless commoners return Rozemyne's memories of them? Mestionora's reaction had implied there were other means of restoring a person's severed memories, but what were they? Would completely re-dyeing Rozemyne's mana and returning it to its original form cause her memories to return as well...?

"Is there anything you can tell me?" Hartmut pressed. "Even just words of warning about how to interact with her going forward."

Ferdinand tapped his temple in thought. He would need to

discuss the matter whether Rozemyne found out about it or not. If nothing else, it seemed reasonable to reveal as much as he would otherwise have shared with her.

“The following information cannot leave Rozemyne’s retainers,” Ferdinand said. He explained that Mestionora had taken Rozemyne’s memories as “payment” for her services, abruptly severing every memory with a greater hold on the rampaging bookworm than her love of reading. “The goddess refused to elaborate, but if Rozemyne has forgotten memories related to her feystone phobia, we can assume that bad thoughts were taken as well as good. I do not imagine there are many things she would prioritize over reading. At the very least, she does not seem to have forgotten her retainers or the archducal family.”

“She ranks me lower than books, then...” Hartmut muttered, dejected. Then he looked up with a start. “Did she not lose her memories of you either?”

“You should already know the answer. There was no dissonance during tea or dinner.”

Indeed, everyone who had attended the gatherings could attest to that fact. As long as Ferdinand did not admit to having channeled mana into Rozemyne without her permission, no one would ever need to know.

“This is but a theory of mine, but I suspect that most of the memories Rozemyne cared about more than reading books had to do with making them,” Ferdinand said. “I am more curious to see what she remembers of the lower-city commoners and those of the temple workshop. As for her other missing memories, who knows? We cannot begin to fathom what might have vanished from her subconscious when not even she remembers anymore.”

Hartmut nodded in agreement. He was one of only two of Rozemyne’s retainers who knew their lady had a family in the lower city. “You seem calm, Lord Ferdinand; do you know of a way to restore her memories?”

“I intend to try a variety of approaches based on history and myths, but I can make no guarantees. As it stands, I am also short on time. It will need to wait until the transference ceremony is complete.”

“Can we trust her to participate in the ceremony and the discussion with the royal family while suffering from memory loss?”

“She still remembers the archducal family and her closest

retainers; do you really think she would have forgotten the royal family or nobles of other duchies?"

"On second thought, I anticipate no problems whatsoever." Everyone present agreed that Rozemyne was unlikely to value the royal family or Dunkelfelger's archducal couple over reading.

"Rozemyne now has goddess-dyed mana," Ferdinand said. "It should be remarkably easy to show the royal family we are above them and to have the nobles of other duchies accept the new Zent and the unprecedented case of an underage woman becoming aub. I intend to exploit this opportunity for as much as it is worth."

"Still, this is quite the predicament. On the one hand, I wish to immediately restore all that Lady Rozemyne has lost... But on the other, I want to thrust her overflowing divinity in the face of every noble in Yurgenschmidt..."

Hartmut cradled his head and started agonizing, but Ferdinand did not care. He promptly moved on to the next topic.

"I forbid any of you from telling Rozemyne she has lost her memories. I cannot imagine what might happen if she loses control of her emotions while infused with divine mana."

As it stood, simply being in Rozemyne's presence was enough to compel most people to kneel in awe. If her emotions rampaged and that divine power ran rampant, no one in the world would be able to stop her.

"I expect silver cloth to be essential during our discussion with royalty. We will not cover her to begin with, but the royals are very likely to offend her, no?"

"Lord Ferdinand, do you consider it wise for her to Crush the royal family with her divine mana at least once...?"

"No, but I take it you do."

Hartmut smiled evasively, but Ferdinand already knew the scholar had behaved disrespectfully around the royals at the Academy.

"Lord Ferdinand," Hartmut continued, "if there is a risk of her goddess-dyed mana going berserk, it might be best to make arrangements for her name-sworn to enter in the case of an emergency."

"Her name-sworn? For what purpose?" Ferdinand asked. He glanced at Justus, but the retainer's look of curiosity showed that not even he knew what Hartmut meant.

"You observed that even archnobles such as Brunhilde and

Rihyarda could not help but tremble when touching Lady Rozemyne, correct? Well, although we name-sworn feel the same sense of awe, we experience no such physical symptoms, perhaps because we are already enveloped in her mana. Laurenz and Matthias confirmed they were also unaffected.”

The smaller one’s capacity, the less one could resist goddess-dyed mana. Thus, while archnobles could not touch Rozemyne without starting to tremble, laynobles could not get near her at all. Hartmut proudly declared that he and other name-sworn retainers were completely immune to this.

“I see. Very well, then. I shall ask Sylvester to arrange a nearby waiting room to be used during the meeting.”

“I thank you.”

Hartmut then departed, leaving the room in silence broken only by the sounds of Lasfam clearing away dishes and the crackling of the fire. Ferdinand rapped a finger against his armrest; he always tapped when he was lost in thought.

Justus waited patiently for the drumming to stop. “Well, Lord Ferdinand... what shall we do?”

Ferdinand looked over his three retainers: Justus, who was awaiting an answer; Eckhart, who was standing as a guard; and Lasfam, who was still clearing away dishes. They had all given their names to him and were thus the most influenced by his decisions.



“Some decisions will change drastically depending on what the obstruction of touch demands,” he eventually said. “Speak not out of loyalty—are you ready for whatever might come?”

“We do as our lord wills.”

Ferdinand reached into his pocket and touched his name-stone, the one Rozemyne had returned to him.

The Pale-Faced Royal Family

An ordonnanz shot into and circled the room before landing on Rihyarda's arm. "This is Leonore. We have arrived at the Adalgisa villa and will soon return to you. The knights here have agreed to help carry our luggage to the dormitory."

Thanks to Ferdinand, the villa's teleportation circle was active again, allowing transportation between Ahrensbach and the Royal Academy. Leonore, Cornelius, Hartmut, and Clarissa had just come back from retrieving their belongings. They had picked up Liesele and Gretia at the same time.

"She wants us to welcome the knights when they arrive," Rihyarda said, "which should be soon if they use the teleportation door. I must go instruct the servants who will receive their luggage. Brunhilde, Otilie, see milady cleaned up and escorted to the front entrance."

Rihyarda then departed, leaving me with Brunhilde and Otilie. They made sure my hair and dress were in order while Bertilde brought over some silver cloth, which was placed gently over my head.

"Damuel, this is Judithe. We are escorting Lady Rozemyne to the entrance hall. Be ready to guard her."

Another ordonnanz. That meant Damuel would be waiting by the stairs on the second floor. Angelica picked me up and carried me, as she had so many times lately.

"Are you all going to switch places with Leonore and the others to pick up your luggage?" I asked.

Angelica sighed. "I insisted on wearing the same clothes—not that I wouldn't wash them—but Laurenz told me no. It's so sad. Lord Eckhart said we should be on guard at all times following the war..." Her tone was melancholic, but no ordinary noblewoman would use the recent conflict as an excuse to stop changing her clothes. Laurenz was right to shut her down.

"Ahaha. I doubt Eckhart meant you should wear the same clothes or keep your armor on at all times. Is he not going to

retrieve his own belongings?”

“Now that you mention it... he did return to Ahrensbach.”

We arrived at the entrance hall. The door was wide open, and my retainers were entering with those carrying their luggage. I asked Angelica to set me down, then addressed the Ahrensbach knights.

“Everyone, I thank you for your help. Consider it greatly appreciated. I was told you plan to take turns going home. Please rest when you can and keep a close eye on Lady Letizia.”

Because of the Lanzenavians’ attack, the nobles still in Ahrensbach’s castle were largely Detlinde’s allies rather than Letizia’s. Detlinde’s group had since been imprisoned, but it wouldn’t be strange if those on her side used this opportunity to start something.

“Worry not, Lady Rozemyne—Lady Letizia is doing fine,” Lieseleta assured me. “She was overjoyed to hear that the fighting at the Royal Academy was over and that you and Lord Ferdinand were safe. Isn’t that right, Gretia?”

“It is,” Gretia replied with a nod. “She treated us very well.”

Upon returning to my chambers, Lieseleta and Gretia once again rejoiced that the battle was over and everyone was safe, then reacted with shock when my silver cloth was removed. The dormitory had returned to normalcy.

In the meantime, I practiced dedication whirling in my room.

This sure is tough...

I was used to my new body when it came to moving normally, but whirling was something else entirely. Maybe because of my longer legs or extra weight, my intuition for maintaining my center of gravity had completely evaporated. I wasn’t sure I’d ever be able to whirl smoothly enough to earn a passing mark from Ferdinand.

I don’t even know when this new coronation ceremony is being held. Am I going to be ready in time...?

Despite my worries, I continued to whirl. I was also memorizing the script for our meeting with the royal family in preparation for when the day finally arrived.

“Lady Rozemyne, we just received new clothes from the Gilberta Company!” Brunhilde announced. “How wonderful that they came in time!”

It was the morning of our meeting. The clothes were made of thin Ahrensbach cloth given to me by Ferdinand and dyed using methods that were popular in Ehrenfest. They came with a matching hairpin, exactly as ordered.

“The thin cloth was such a splendid choice,” Brunhilde said. “It lets just enough light through. And the hairpin Tuuli made looks as gorgeous as always.”

“Indeed... It really is a wonderful combination,” I replied with a nod and smile. But on the inside, I was panicking.

Tuuli... Is that my hairpin craftsperson?

The name had completely slipped my mind. I must have met them in person when placing my order, but I drew a blank every time I tried to remember their face.

Why can't I remember...?

They had to be a hairpin craftsperson working for the Gilberta Company. I could picture Corinna and her seamstresses without any trouble at all, so why not this other person she must have brought with her?

What else have I forgotten? Are the memories important, or do they not matter?

As I racked my brain, I suddenly remembered Ferdinand asking me about my memories when I woke up in the Garden of Beginnings. He had said something about Mestionora warping my mind while possessing me.

Could this be the cost of giving one's body to a goddess?

A chill ran down my spine. My stomach hurt like it was being squeezed. My memories had vanished in such an unnatural way—I didn't know what I'd forgotten or how to remember it. The very thought was terrifying.

Calm down. You don't need to worry. There's bound to be a way to get your memories back.

My thoughts had been a little scrambled at first, but I'd quickly remembered the events that had preceded my encounter with the goddess. Maybe it was optimistic of me to assume, but my missing memories were bound to be knocking around somewhere. I was sure I would remember them soon enough.

For now, though, I still didn't know anything about this Tuuli person.

“Lord Ferdinand has arrived at the tea party room,” Rihyarda informed me. “He wishes to speak with you before the meeting.”

Ferdinand was the one person with whom I could discuss matters relating to the goddess. I went to approach the door, but Angelica used silver cloth to snatch me up once again.

“Angelica, be more careful with Lady Rozemyne,” Clarissa said. “You are treating her as you would a piece of luggage. Be honored that you have the opportunity to carry a divine avatar and make sure each of your movements exudes graceful delicacy.”

“Right. I will next time.”

It certainly was true that Angelica kept getting rougher with me, but I was much too worried about my memory to care. She could treat me however she pleased as long as she got me to my destination quickly.

Attendants were going in and out of the tea party room in preparation for our lunch meeting with the royal family. Meanwhile, the archducal couple was reviewing everything to make sure there weren’t any issues. There was a space in the corner of the room for the retainers of guests to take turns resting, and when we arrived, I saw Ferdinand there with a sound-blocker already activated. I took the seat opposite him, then waited as our attendants made us some tea and took their leave.

“Rozemyne, did you memorize the sheets I gave you?” Ferdinand asked.

“Yes, but there is something more important I wish to discuss. Some of my memories are missing. For example...” I reached up and touched my hair. “I can’t remember the face of the craftsperson who made this hairpin.”

I expected a strong response, but Ferdinand just nodded. “So I would imagine. You cannot even remember the dyer who colored those clothes, can you? You made them your Renaissance. I suspect your memories of them have been severed.”

“Dyer? Renaissance?”

Once again, I desperately racked my brain. “Renaissance” stood out to me—it was the title given to those who joined the archducal family’s personnel to spread the new dyeing method, which had been used on the skirt I was wearing. I gazed down and touched the cloth. I’d asked for the method to be used in the first place, so I must have had a dyer in my employ... but I couldn’t remember their face or name.

“Nothing is coming to me...” I muttered. “Ferdinand, what do you know about all this? You said the memories were severed, not

gone. Did the goddess tell you something? I must know.”

I rose to my feet, but Ferdinand gestured for me to sit down again, deliberately eyeing my retainers all the while. As much as I wanted to grab him by the shoulders and shake whatever secrets he was keeping out of him, we were in full view of an entire room of people; even if they could not hear us, they would want to know what had gotten such a rise out of me.

The incident in the Garden of Beginnings and the truth about Mestionora’s descent would drastically impact the selection of the next Zent. For that reason, I had been told not to say anything at least until our upcoming meeting with the royals was over.

“Mestionora wanted to keep you distracted during her descent, so she cut your ties to anything stronger than your love of books,” Ferdinand explained. “She made it very clear that the memories were severed, not erased. I could not glean any more than that, but I doubt there was much you would prioritize over the library of a goddess. I even have a good idea which people you might have forgotten, though I cannot speak for anything that was festering in your subconscious.”

“So... I cared more about a dyer and a hairpin craftsperson than reading? That doesn’t make any sense—not when I still remember the archducal family and my retainers. You know about the people I’ve forgotten, don’t you? Can you tell me what they’re like?”

Though I thought a little insight might help me to remember, Ferdinand shook his head and refused to elaborate. I didn’t feel anything about the dyer or the hairpin craftsperson, but for my memories of them to have been severed in the first place, they must have once been important to me. I needed to get those memories back.

“How can I restore the connections?” I asked. “Do you know?”

“Given our lack of time and resources, there is little we can do right now. You will need to wait until the next Zent has been chosen. Most of the people precious to you are in Ehrenfest—and commoners, at that. You will not encounter them at the Royal Academy. I will support you later, so just wait for now.”

“‘Later’? Do you promise?”

Ferdinand nodded, and the tension drained out of my body. As much as he kept secrets and tried to manipulate me to do as he wanted, he never outright lied to me. His promise meant he would eventually help me, even if our hands were tied for now.

"May I proceed with the pre-meeting?" Ferdinand asked. "There is not much time before lunch."

"Yes."

"Dunkelfelger's archducal couple has arrived," an attendant by the door announced just as fourth bell rang. Sylvester and Florencia welcomed them as the hosts of today's meeting.

"Take your seat," Ferdinand told me. "And remember not to do anything funny."

Ferdinand and I were attending not as hosts but as guests. I was invited as the current owner of Ahrensbach's foundation and the divine avatar of a goddess here to grant the Grutrissheit, while Ferdinand was invited as the fiancé of the duchy's next aub by royal decree.

But I'm the only one being made to sit here. This is so uncomfortable... Curse you, Ferdinand.

During a gathering such as this one, it was customary for all guests to greet the highest-ranking attendees. These people of note were given chairs some distance away from the main table to avoid obstructing other guests and attendants. Putting me here was a sly trick to emphasize that, as a divine avatar, I was superior to the royal family.

I almost couldn't believe how many people were surrounding me. My knights were standing in a row behind my chair, while Ferdinand and Hartmut were standing to my immediate left and right, respectively.

"Ferdinand, should you not sit as well...?" I asked. "You're going to look strange if you just keep standing there. It makes you seem like one of my retainers."

"Only those of equal status may sit beside you. If we waived that rule for my sake, it would detract from your importance as a divine avatar and defeat the whole point. One of your retainers can take my place at your side if you would prefer, but I suspect Philine or Roderick will immediately bend if one of the royals complains about your status."

"Please stay where you are. Your support heartens me."

"As I thought."

It was then that Dunkelfelger's archducal couple concluded their greetings: "Aub Ehrenfest, we are grateful that you decided to host this meeting. I also sincerely appreciate the role you played in

letting my duchy experience true ditter.”

They went to sit down, noticed that I was waiting to be greeted as well, and then strode over with wide eyes. I almost stood up on instinct—I was so used to their status exceeding my own—but a subtle nod from Ferdinand reminded me to stay still.

Dunkelfelger’s archducal couple soon knelt before me. “O Mestionora, Goddess of Wisdom, let our duchy be blessed.”

Ferdinand had told those in our immediate circle to treat me as they normally would, so only Hartmut and Clarissa had knelt upon seeing me. Their displays of reverence, which I’d taken to be excessive, must have actually been the norm for nobles in the presence of divine mana.

The aub and his wife were showing respect not to me but to the goddess-dyed mana now inhabiting my vessel. That was why Ferdinand had ordered me not to get carried away—I would need to face the consequences when the divine mana faded. I wasn’t really sure what it meant to ‘get carried away’ in this scenario, but I now had an archduke kneeling before me whose status had always exceeded my own. It was as uncomfortable as when Benno and the others had knelt to me for the very first time.

“Aub Dunkelfelger,” I said, “I apologize, but Mestionora has returned to the distant heights. She might have dyed my mana, but I am still only Rozemyne and cannot give a goddess’s blessing.”

“Oh, that is a shame.”

Though my explanation sounded a little awkward, the influence of my divine mana remained. Dunkelfelger’s archducal couple refused to stand.

“I never thought the day would come when I would fight alongside a true divine avatar...” Aub Dunkelfelger said. “The knights of my duchy regret that you were not there to witness our heroic victory against the Sovereign Order.”

The archduke continued even as the attendants began pouring tea, explaining everything he and his troops had accomplished. Many of Dunkelfelger’s knights were still overjoyed to have participated in such an enormous ditter match. The same couldn’t be said for the knights of Ahrensbach, who were on edge about overseeing and interrogating their Lanzenave prisoners.

“I am told my husband might be put on the throne depending on the royal family’s words and actions during this meeting...” Sieglinde mused aloud. She glanced cautiously at the door. “I...

wonder how they will respond to the current situation.”

I was deeply concerned about the future of the country’s royals. My eyes also wandered to the door, which the attendants were opening to welcome a new wave of guests.

“Now, if you will excuse us...” Sieglinde said, then took her husband to their seats just as the royal family entered. There was an emaciated-looking Trauerqual with his first wife, Ralfrieda; Sigiswald and Adolphine; Anastasius and Eglantine; and the young Hildebrand with his mother, Magdalena. It was springtime, but the third prince was keeping his hands in a fur muff.

Under normal circumstances, for a gathering like this one, rulers would choose to bring only their first wives. It was surprising to see Magdalena here, but she had received an invitation both as a knight who had led the charge to smite Raublut and as the third prince’s mother. She would need to take responsibility for her son’s actions.

Oof... They look so pale and sick as heck.

Still, could anyone blame them? They must have heard the gist of what we intended to discuss from Anastasius and Magdalena.

“Aub Ehrenfest, I thank you for hosting us today,” Trauerqual said in a slightly raspy voice. Then he knelt in front of me alongside the rest of the royal family. “O Mestionora, Goddess of Wisdom, we beseech you for your blessing.”

“I wish to reward you all for your goodwill and persistent hard work,” I said. “It was not lost on me that Prince Sigiswald gave me a symbol of authority in my time of need.”

I turned to Hartmut and gave him the same signal we had agreed upon during our pre-meeting. He reacted at once and passed me a leather pouch. Sigiswald must have realized what was inside because his eyes darted between Sylvester and me, betraying offense.

“No, um... That is actually—”

“My apologies. You went out of your way to prepare it for me, but the chain was damaged as a result of the nonstop fighting. I thought it best to return it right away.”

I was being sincere—we really didn’t have much time. I’d spent the previous night inspecting the chain, making sure it was ready to be returned, only to accidentally bombard it with the divine mana leaking out of me. The chain had immediately turned to dust, and even the feystone part had ended up brittle.

I need to return it now, while it still at least somewhat resembles its original shape! Before it crumbles away entirely!

Sensing the urgency, I took the necklace from its small pouch.

“Rozemyne,” Ferdinand interjected, “do not grab it with your bare hands, or—”

“Oops!”

His warning came too late; the feystone portion had clung to its form, but my touch reduced it to powder. The royals inhaled sharply and stared in disbelief. I really hadn’t meant to break it. The divine mana was to blame, and it wasn’t even something I could control.

“M-My apologies once again,” I said. “I assume gold dust made from goddess-dyed mana is exceptionally valuable as a brewing material, considering its vast mana capacity and many elements, so, um... Hopefully, that makes up for the loss.”

I returned the dust in my hand to the pouch, which I then held out to Sigiswald. He stared at it in silence for a few seconds before finally smiling and accepting it. “I am glad our symbol of authority was of use to you,” he said.

Ferdinand smirked and touched my hairpin. “Gold dust made from divine mana, hm? How I envy you, Prince Sigiswald...”

You’re begging for ingredients now, of all times?! Get a grip! Your “mad scientist” attitude isn’t welcome here! Look how awkward you’ve made the royals!

Trying to suppress my internal outrage, I put on a divine smile befitting a goddess. “Goodness, Ferdinand... If you need gold dust, I am more than willing to give you some. But you must provide your own materials and feystone.”

“I am grateful for the Divine Avatar of Mestionora’s consideration,” Ferdinand replied. Despite his teasing voice and venomous smile, he seemed exceptionally pleased; obtaining new research ingredients was just that important to him.

Well, I want to keep him in a good mood. For my sake and the royal family’s...

“Let us eat lunch before our meeting,” I said, not wanting our guests to have to keep kneeling before me.

We all took our seats, and the attendants started serving us. We had asked that everyone bring as few retainers as they could, but even then, there were enough people gathered that the room felt more cramped than when we’d invited archduke candidates of

every duchy to a tea party.

Hildebrand took his hands out of his fur muff to reveal the schtappe-sealing bracelets on his wrists. Everyone outside the royal family watched as they were removed.

“He should not have a schtappe yet,” Magdalena explained, having read the room. “And as he acquired it through illicit means, we must forbid its use.”

The third prince cast his eyes down, desperately holding back tears in the face of his mother’s stern remarks. One could tell at a glance that he had already been lectured to the ends of the earth about his crime. It wasn’t his fault—Raublut had manipulated him—but not even children were shown mercy in this world. Seeing him now reminded me of when Wilfried was punished for entering the Ivory Tower, which filled me with bitterness.

Maybe I can help somehow, like I did way back then...

As I gazed upon Hildebrand, I noticed that Eglantine was eyeing me closely. She looked as pretty as ever, but her smile gave me no clues as to what she wanted. I gave her a vague smile in response.

“Today’s menu shall comprise Ehrenfest dishes made with Ahrensbach ingredients,” Sylvester announced. It was our way of demonstrating that our two duchies were still on good terms despite Georgine’s war—or if nothing else, that Ehrenfest was still on good terms with me.

There hadn’t been time to devise a new menu or have the court chefs practice new recipes, so we had no new dishes with which to wow our guests. Still, it was a rare and welcome opportunity for them to enjoy seafood.

“These dishes really stand out from the Ehrenfest food we ate during the Archduke Conference,” said Ralfrieda, the Zent’s first wife.

“Indeed,” Florencia replied with a smile. “As these are Ahrensbach ingredients, we rarely have the chance to eat them ourselves. We have Lady Letizia to thank for providing them.” She turned to me, indicating that this was our chance to hammer home our good relationship with Letizia.

“Quite,” I said. “The dockworkers of Ahrensbach sent so much fish to the castle as thanks for defending the port from the Lanzenavians and granting even the commoners healing. In that sense, we should also thank Lady Hannelore for today’s meal.”

“Her fighting was excellent,” Ferdinand added. “The moment

she proposed using wolfaniels to capitalize on our enemies' lack of mana, I knew she was a true archduke candidate of Dunkelfelger. I am grateful that she and her duchy responded to Rozemyne's call for aid."

We spent a while discussing the Purge of Lanzenave and the subsequent battles, but our focus soon turned to the investigation into the Sovereign Knight's Order and the current status of the Royal Academy.

"Our probe into those Raublut incited is progressing quite smoothly," Sigiswald informed us. "As it turned out, there were many Lanzenavians among the Sovereign knights in the auditorium. A scholar working on the investigation tells us the influence of trug on them has begun to fade. Not everything is clear, but their memories can be read, making it fairly simple to identify the criminals and their co-conspirators."

Ferdinand glanced at me. "That would be because Rozemyne's waschen wiped away everything brought from Lanzenave."

"Goodness..." I muttered. "The Goddess of Water's divine might truly is impressive."

My only aim had been to stop the use of any more instant-death poison; I certainly hadn't expected to ease the sway of our enemies' trug. Anastasius wore a grimace as he thought back to the battle—the whirlpool had thrown him all the way up into the audience seating—but still... Such was the glorious power of the goddess who washed away Ewigeliebe and brought about spring.

Most of the Sovereign nobles had since been put through a waschen to ensure that no one else was under the influence of trug. Those who were clear found themselves submerged in water only briefly, but the rest had to wait as their minds were slowly cleansed.

"I was underwater so long that I thought my retainers might end up drowning me before my inevitable execution..." Trauerqual said, a distant look in his eyes. Raublut had used trug on him over such an extensive period, determined to make Gervasio the next Zent, that scrubbing its influence had taken an obscenely long time.

"As for the current state of the Royal Academy..." Eglantine said, "Aub Klassenberg rushed over in response to both the sudden activation of his country gate and Dunkelfelger's request for aid."

"As did Aubs Hauchletzte and Gilessenmeyer," Adolphine added. "Though it isn't yet time for the Archduke Conference, more

and more aubs are gathering at the Academy.”

The higher-ranking duchies Dunkelfelger had contacted knew only that Lanzenavians had invaded the Sovereignty through Ahrensbach. They desperately tried to gather more information at the Academy but weren't able to obtain any meaningful answers; an announcement had gone out that anyone who stepped foot outside their dormitory would be cut down without warning.

“Many duchies have contacted us wanting to know more about the situation,” I said. “We have yet to respond to any of them.”

The results of our meeting would be compiled into a report, which would then be distributed to all the duchies in Yurgenschmidt. Only then did it strike me what an insane predicament I was in.

Terms for the New Zent

Once we'd eaten lunch, which was made all the better by reports about the current state of affairs, the attendants brought us tea and some desserts. Then our retainers took their leave; the discussion we were about to have concerned matters far too sensitive for their ears, and we could always contact them by ordonnanz if necessary.

In no time at all, the population of our meeting was a mere fraction of what it had been before. I gazed around the quiet tea party room and slowly inhaled.

"Now, let us discuss who shall take the throne," I said. "As you already know, Mestionora descended into my body on the day of the fighting. Both she and Erwaermen made it clear that they want a true Zent to rule as soon as—"

"Then give Father the Grutrissheit and—"

"Prince Sigiswald," Adolphine interjected, "you mustn't interrupt those who rank above you."

The first prince's eyes widened in shock; he must never have encountered someone with a higher status than himself and his father. He seemed to notice that everyone was looking at him because he sat bolt upright, apologized to me, and made a gesture urging me to continue.

"The gods want a Zent who can dye Yurgenschmidt's foundation," I said. "It seems the royal family has been supplying not the true foundation but something else, and the country will soon run out of mana and collapse."

The royals all gasped, their eyes wide open. Only now were they learning that the "foundation" they had desperately channeled their mana into for so long was meant for something else.

"That said, the place you supplied is not completely disconnected from the foundation," I explained. "The replenishment hall in the Sovereignty's palace is connected to the prayer hall in the Sovereign temple, and a certain magic tool in said prayer hall connects to the Royal Academy's replenishment hall. From there,

mana travels to the foundation. The magic tool that transports mana requires mana to be used, so some portion of yours *has* reached the core foundation... just not nearly enough to actually support the country.”

Too much mana was lost before it reached Yurgenschmidt’s foundational magic in the Royal Academy. Some had made it, but that knowledge came as little solace to the exhausted royals.

“Then it is all the more crucial that the Grutrissheit be—”

“Indeed, a new Zent must be chosen posthaste. Please understand, however, that whoever takes the throne will need to accede to the gods’ demands.”

“The gods’ demands?” Anastasius repeated.

I nodded, and everyone sat up straighter than ever. It was nice that they were taking things seriously, but I couldn’t help feeling that I was deceiving them; these were technically *Ferdinand’s* demands, as he’d no doubt interpreted the gods’ words in whatever way was most convenient for him.

“First,” I said, “the foundation must be filled as quickly as possible. Second, the Lanzenavians with mana must be accepted into Yurgenschmidt. Third, no lives are to be taken as punishment for this rebellion. And fourth, the Zents to follow must be candidates who obtain Mestionora’s wisdom through their own power. That about sums it up.”

Trauerqual stared at me in shock. “I can understand needing to fill the foundation, but the Lanzenavians are criminals who invaded our country...” he spat. “None of the duchies would accept them as nobles, not even by Mestionora’s command.”

Ferdinand shook his head. “We must accept them into Yurgenschmidt. But we are under no obligation to treat them like nobles.”

“Then how should we treat them? I was told some of them have schtappes.”

“They did not attend the Royal Academy and instead obtained them by manipulating Prince Hildebrand. We need only seal their schtappes as we have done with the prince. From there, they can be chained up in cells and drained of mana, or perhaps turned into Sovereign priests and shrine maidens so they can supply Yurgenschmidt directly. Neither the goddess nor Erwaermen specified how they were to be treated.”

Sick of being used as mana batteries, Lanzenave’s royals had

invaded Yurgenschmidt in the hope of acquiring their freedom. Their failure would see them doomed to the same fate once again. It was tragically ironic, and I genuinely felt bad for them, but I saw no reason to speak up in protest; the Lanzenavians had sown the seeds of their own demise, and their fate was nothing compared to that of the Ahrensbach nobles who were brutally murdered overnight. Besides, all Yurgenschmidt nobles dedicated mana to the land in one form or another—what more could our enemies expect?

“So you would propose keeping them alive and taking their mana?” Sigiswald asked. His face clouded with concern. “Yurgenschmidt needs as much as it can get, but I worry that will breed an entire generation of resentment...”

“I agree,” Eglantine added. “This feels too dangerous.” They were probably so apprehensive because royals and top-ranking duchies were taught that mass executions were normal and the proper way of dealing with such problems, but I couldn’t see where they were coming from.

“Hm? I understand that purges are meant to stop resentment from seeping into the future, but was it not a purge that led to the royal family losing the Grutrissheit and Yurgenschmidt being thrust into a mana crisis?” I asked. “You cannot throw aside so many lives and so much knowledge without consequence. There is still resentment festering within the deposed duchies and those on the losing side, and executing those who were guilty only by association created more resentment than it erased. If you think taking even more lives will solve the problem, then I really am tempted to laugh.”

The royals froze. They hadn’t been joking and wanted to perform yet another mass execution. I was so glad the Goddess of Wisdom had forbidden the taking of any more lives.

“The royal family is to blame for Yurgenschmidt being in such grave danger,” I continued. “That must be clear to you by now. Unless none of you see the error of your ways—in which case, I am quite frankly aghast.”

They averted their gazes. I could see Sylvester gawking in terror out of the corner of my eye. It seemed unwise for an aub to be expressing his emotions so openly during a meeting like this; he should have been more dignified and exuded more authority.

“Though our perspectives on this matter are not the same,” I said, “I respect how much work the royal family has put into

maintaining Yurgenschmidt despite lacking the Grutrissheit. I wanted to grant the book to one of you to make the transition of power as peaceful as can be, but as Ferdinand warned..." I placed a troubled hand on my cheek. "I am growing somewhat uneasy. Yurgenschmidt's current political system is a distorted travesty. We swore to Erwaermen that we would use this opportunity to restore the old ways."

We hadn't made a formal declaration, but I didn't think I was lying to anyone. Erwaermen wanted more Zent candidates to obtain the Book of Mestionora, and Ferdinand declared that he intended to help.

"The old ways?"

Everyone looked unsure about what I meant—everyone except Ferdinand, who had written the script I was reading from. I inspected the room, then declared what was expected from the new Zent.

"Indeed. The royal family must be abolished, and Zents shall no longer be chosen hereditarily. Candidates will need to obtain the Book of Mestionora themselves."

The blood drained from Sigiswald's face. Adolphine, his first wife, was already wearing a look of resignation.

I continued, "The Sovereign temple will return to the Royal Academy—which was and always has been Yurgenschmidt's holy land—and the Zent shall once again serve as the Sovereign High Bishop. They will dedicate themselves to reviving old rituals and fill the country with mana. None of you take issue, I assume. There was a time when you all discussed having me become the Sovereign High Bishop."

Several of the royals had turned ghostly white. Sylvester and Florencia, meanwhile, looked like their souls had left their bodies; they wore vague smiles and stared into empty space, having given up on getting involved with the conversation.

"In line with these changes, the royal palace and its villas will be sealed, and the Zent's family will move to the Royal Academy. The palace and its villas were built by a Zent who feared assassination and wanted to escape their political enemies to preserve their newly founded dynasty. Under the new system, the Zent will not live off of the Sovereignty's Central District; instead, they will receive taxes gathered from all of the duchies. Aubs support themselves in the same manner—and if the Zent finds

themselves in need of more funds, they can earn more money through their own endeavors.”

“Rozemyne,” Ferdinand warned.

Oops... I miiiight have strayed from the script a little. Still, I think this is a good opportunity for nobles of top-ranking duchies to start thinking about earning their own money.

“Thus, the new Zent will need to live in a way that completely shatters the concept of the royal family constructed across recent generations. Do any of you volunteer for the role?”

The royals exchanged glances. Though the person who received the Grutrissheit would become the new Zent, they would not live as they were all used to. They were apprehensive about putting themselves forward.

“If one of you volunteers,” I noted, “we shall conceal the royal family’s misdeeds so your rule goes unfettered and ensure that all royals except the Zent and their family become the aubs of previously deposed duchies. Otherwise, we will publish your actions and spread them throughout the country until the other duchies agree to dissolve the royal family. We shall make Aub Dunkelfelger an interim Zent and embroider his contributions to the war to make him a hero.”

As the royal family sat in silence, too stunned to even speak, I felt a slap on my thigh. Ferdinand was wearing the same radiant smile that told me he was furious.

“Rozemyne,” he said, “your explanation was painfully lacking.”

In what seemed like the blink of an eye, Ferdinand had gone from scolding me for saying too much to chastising me for not saying enough. I couldn’t win. Nonetheless, I was committed to acting like a goddess, and it seemed very much in character for the Divine Avatar of Mestionora to distribute published goods across the country.

“Oh my... But using printed goods to manipulate the public is the most basic of basic strategies. I would also consider it a fine opportunity to spread awareness of the printing industry. Is it not a fitting approach for me to take as an avatar of the Goddess of Wisdom? I already commissioned the author of *A Ditter Story* to write a new book capturing Dunkelfelger’s heroics during the war.”

“Come again?!” Aub Dunkelfelger exclaimed. “We’re the protagonists of the next volume?! We *must* buy up all the copies!”

“To what end...?” Sieglinde asked, wearing the same look of

exasperation I normally saw from Ferdinand. “The books are meant to inform the public.”

“The world would surely end if you were given power...”

Ferdinand muttered to me with a glare before turning his attention to the royals. “As you fear, if someone outside your family becomes the new Zent, the public will resent you for not being able to forestall a foreign invasion. To prevent the dissatisfied nobles from rising up and plunging the country into another civil war, we will need to relegate you all to an ivory tower. You can rest assured, though—as per our promise with the gods, not a single criminal will face execution.”

Ferdinand spoke with an evil smile that made his true meaning clear: he would spare their lives but do nothing to make them enjoyable. The royals paled, so I rushed to clarify. I certainly didn’t intend for them to be tortured.

“As this is only to avoid a civil war, we can guarantee that those who did not commit any crimes will continue to live prosperously. I even spoke with Ferdinand and managed to secure some nice perks for anyone who ends up in an ivory tower. Two meals a day *and* an entire book to read!”

A cold silence fell over the room.

Wh-What? Why aren’t they rejoicing? I worked so hard to negotiate for their sake...

The royals weren’t the only ones muttering in disbelief; those from Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger seemed just as taken aback. They must not have cared about getting books in prison.

Hmph! It’s because you don’t read that you all understand so little about ancient language! You get what you deserve!

Amid the awkwardness, Eglantine placed a hand on her cheek and looked at Ferdinand and me. “Um, Lady Rozemyne... Might I ask a question?”

“Yes, very well. You can each receive *two* books.”

“Erm, no... I remember it came up during one of our previous discussions that performing dedication whirls en masse and selecting Zent candidates from other duchies would cause chaos. Yet here you are proposing that future Zents be chosen from outside the royal family. Is that not contradictory? I wish to know how this will not simply bring about more disputes in the future.”

Eglantine’s question didn’t surprise me; she despised war above all else. Ferdinand had predicted what she would ask and prepared

a response for me, so I mentally repeated what we had discussed during our preliminary meeting.

“Even now, I consider it best for someone among the royal family to become the next Zent. I would rather we avoid disputes where we can. But more than a year has passed since the means to obtain the Grutrissheit was unearthed, and even now, not a single one of you has acquired it.”

Ferdinand glared at me.

Ngh... I get it, okay? Eglantine is the closest to the Grutrissheit, since she was born with all the elements. Saying it outright just feels mean, though.

Besides, everyone understood without me having to say it. I returned my focus to Eglantine and gestured for her to respond.

“No, we have not,” she said. “But only because we agreed the Zent would adopt you. We were going to obtain it through you.”

“In other words,” Ferdinand interjected, “you planned to have someone outside the royal family obtain the Grutrissheit. Back then, I really did think it best for the royal family to secure it... but never in my wildest dreams had it entered my head that you were all so lazy, greedy, and selfish.”

“Excuse me?!” Sylvester exclaimed, snapping out of the stupor my rampage had inspired.

Ferdinand merely smiled and continued. The script he’d written for me had sounded provocative enough, but his remarks were just plain hostile. Gone was his surface-level politeness; he was treating the royals like incompetent fools. I couldn’t help but blink in surprise.

“I conveyed what was necessary for the royal family to obtain the Grutrissheit without causing discord. I also accepted the royal decree to go to Ahrensbach to prove I did not intend to incite a rebellion. And yet...” Ferdinand paused, and a broad smile spread across his face. “Even with the information I provided, all of you decided to claim the Grutrissheit through Rozemyne rather than acquire it yourselves. She had promised to defend Ehrenfest in my stead only for you to force her into a nightmarish engagement for the sake of adopting her. King Trauerqual, can you imagine how I felt upon hearing that? I agreed to leave Ehrenfest to protect it, but you put the entire duchy in danger in my absence. Take a moment to consider my reaction.”

Ferdinand was focused not on Eglantine, who had asked the

question to begin with, but on Trauerqual. The king hung his head, his lips pressed tightly together.

“Lord Ferdinand,” Magdalena interjected. “Even under these circumstances, you are being far too rude. You sit before the Zent.”

Trauerqual shook his head. “You may not know this, Magdalena, as you are excluded from socializing... but I really have demanded a lot from this man.”

“Then I spoke out of turn. My apologies.”

“King Trauerqual, might I ask what those demands were?” Sylvester inquired, having been denied entrance to that fateful meeting. “As his elder brother and Aub Ehrenfest, I think I have the right to know.”

The king looked at Ferdinand, engaged in some kind of mental debate, then slowly shook his head. “In return for accepting my demands, Lord Ferdinand asked that I never repeat them. I do not intend to violate that now. I shan’t anger him or the Divine Avatar of Mestionora more than I already have.”

Ferdinand nodded, looking somewhat relieved. “To answer your question, Lady Eglantine, I think some internal disputes are preferable to the royals continuing to sit on their hands as the country crumbles around them, knowing full well how to obtain the Grutrisheit.”

“I see...”

“That said... if you would rather preserve the royal family’s claim to the throne, there are some methods you could use. The assigned Zent could simply ensure their children obtain more complete Books of Mestionora than any of the other candidates.”

In other words, the royals could actually start putting in the work. Eglantine daintily and quizzically cocked her head.

“I would consider it best for the royal family to strive to produce future Zents,” I said. “Though I intend to fix Yurgenschmidt’s distorted government and publicize how to obtain the Book of Mestionora, members of the former royal family need not vanish from the stage.”

“Could you elaborate on what you mean by ‘distorted government’?” Ferdinand asked, prompting me to continue.

I explained how Zents across history had slowly warped the process of ascending to the throne. The royals must not have known in the slightest; the palace’s library contained only the documents their forebears had taken with them when they first moved away

from the holy land.

Sigiswald looked as though he'd just been struck by lightning, but he quickly returned to his senses. "O avatar of Mestionora, I understand now that the gods wish to dismantle the royal family. It would be my honor to become the next Zent and restore the old ways, as per the wishes of the divine."

Ferdinand raised an eyebrow.

Anastasius gave the first prince a look of concern. "Brother, you ___"

"People all across the country expect me to become the next Zent," Sigiswald continued, interrupting his brother's plea with a calm smile. "Thus, there is no one better suited to the task. Do you not agree, Anastasius?"

The second prince fell silent and cast his eyes down, having lost the will to speak. Sigiswald must have interpreted that as acquiescence because he returned to addressing me with a wider smile.

"Though I will conform to the old ways, the blame for this invasion lies primarily with Ahrensbach. I do not agree with the royal family bearing the full weight of the burden."

"Brother!" Anastasius cried.

"Certainly, the Sovereign knight commander's betrayal created this mess, but it was Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger who sprang into action to stop him. Does the fault not lie with those of Ahrensbach who failed to vanquish the Lanzenavians in their duchy? Should they not be punished before anyone in the royal family?"

Sigiswald punctuated his argument with a sharp look at Ferdinand, not even trying to be subtle. He genuinely seemed to believe that Ferdinand was to blame for not controlling Detlinde and forestalling the invasion. I could tell that he was used to ordering others around and didn't expect anyone to challenge his word as the first prince. His life up until this point—his experiences and the way he was raised—had given him that mindset.

Prince Sigiswald really doesn't know his place, does he? Is this any way to act when he's trying to get a divine avatar's approval to serve as the next Zent?

Still, I wasn't sure whether I could chastise him. My understanding of how royals thought and made decisions was flimsy at best. I glanced at Ferdinand, who was now wearing a dazzling smile.

Uh-oh. He's out for blood.

"Very well," he said. "Ahrensbach is prepared to deliver you its prisoners. We shall transfer them to the Sovereignty as soon as you give the word."

In other words, "If you want to punish them, hurry up and do it already. You're the only ones we're waiting on."

Books aside, nothing could convince me to oppose Ferdinand when he was this furious. Our good friend Sigiswald must have been especially courageous. He failed to sense the extreme malice seeping through Ferdinand's smile, but he must have understood the subtext, at the very least; he hesitated a little before continuing.

"I am referring not to the culprits themselves but to you, Lord Ferdinand, who married into Ahrensbach to support the next aub. Are you not aware of your own crimes?"

At last, something snapped inside of me. Sigiswald had failed his most basic duties as a prince; what gave him the right to disrespect someone who had moved to another duchy and worked his fingers to the bone at the demand of a royal decree? I wasn't about to let that slide.

"Prince Sigiswald... Did you just accuse Ferdinand of not carrying out his duties?"

The prince stared at me, surprised that I was getting involved. Anastasius, meanwhile, put his head in his hands and groaned. If he had wanted to spare his brother the embarrassment to come, he should have intervened when he had the chance.

I continued, "It was your family's royal decree that put Ferdinand to work in Ahrensbach before he could marry into the duchy and acquire citizenship there. And even when his wedding was delayed, he was not granted the common courtesy of returning home. Those despicable actions were the reason he ended up poisoned and needed to rush into battle with little to no time to recover. Can you really claim that someone who gathered and commanded volunteers from two duchies—who contributed so much to a victory that even you admit saved Yurgenschmidt—failed to carry out his duties?"

"Lady Rozemyne is correct," Aub Dunkelfelger added. "Lord Ferdinand smote the Lanzenavian soldiers in Ahrensbach, chased away the Ahrensbach soldiers who invaded Ehrenfest, and then captured the Lanzenavians attempting to obtain the Book of Mestionora in the Sovereignty. Considering that he was merely

engaged to the future Aub Ahrensbach, not married to her, one could say he *over-performed*. Any of my knights who fought alongside him will testify that he spared not even a moment to rest.”

“Interesting...” Sigiswald replied, but the look in his eyes was entirely unconvinced.

“Prince Sigiswald,” I said, “I must ask, while Lord Ferdinand was carrying out the duties thrust upon him by royal decree, what were you and the rest of the royal family doing? Might I remind you that both Ehrenfest *and* Dunkelfelger warned you of the danger to come.”

If anyone had abandoned their obligations, it certainly hadn’t been Ferdinand or me. The prince openly opposed the idea that the royal family was to blame, but again, what in the world had they been up to?

Sigiswald merely twitched a little. Maybe my stern glare was overwhelming him. In any case, it gave me the perfect opportunity to hammer home my argument.

“Despite our warnings, the royals failed to notice Raublut’s betrayal or the proliferation of trug in the Sovereignty. You were foolishly deceived into allowing the Lanzenavians to obtain their *schtappes*, then abandoned your duty to protect Yurgenschmidt’s foundation so you could hole up in the royal palace. Name *one* thing the lot of you achieved. I was there during the battle for the auditorium, doing whatever I could to fight back the invaders. Pray tell, Prince Sigiswald—where were *you*?”

“As a prince, I was directing Sovereign nobles from within... my...” He fell silent, unable to contend with my knowing smile. By deciding to remain in his villa, he had relinquished any claim to having defended Yurgenschmidt.

“You were acting with your own safety in mind, having completely disregarded the country and its people. Zents and aubs have one duty more crucial than any other: protecting their foundations. The moment you prioritized your villas, you failed as royals. Do you understand me?”

“Rozemyne, that is enough,” Ferdinand warned me, lightly tugging on my sleeve. “Your chastisement as a divine avatar is draining the life from the other royals.”

I cast my eyes around the room and saw that, indeed, the others looked extremely unwell. “You have a point. However, their

unreasonable demands and ridiculous expectations since the civil war have caused so much more harm. Countless people lost their lives—a much worse fate than simply feeling a little sick. Let them pale in the face of their crimes.”

Ferdinand stood up and grabbed my arm. On closer inspection, he looked pale too, and there was urgency in his eyes that anyone would have noticed.

Wait a second... Ferdinand looks just as disturbed as the royals.

“Rozemyne, are you aware that your eyes have changed color?” he asked. “Do you realize the divine power radiating from your mana is swelling and Crushing all those in the room?”

I was angry with Sigiswald, but no, those things hadn’t occurred to me at all. I guessed the first prince’s trembling *wasn’t* because he felt ashamed of the misdeeds being thrust in his face.

“No...” I replied. “None of that was my intention.”

Trauerqual slowly raised a hand, barely able to keep his breathing steady as he endured my Crushing. “Do permit me to speak, Lady Rozemyne.” His polite request made Sigiswald once again look like he’d been struck by Verdrenna’s lightning.

“Go on,” I said.

“Please forgive my foolish son for not realizing the severity of his misdeeds. In the first place, there is no need to take his thoughtless words to heart; we have already sworn not to punish Lord Ferdinand for any of the crimes Detlinde committed.”

The king’s words brought me comfort. And now that he mentioned it, though my recollection was still clouded, I vaguely remembered the existence of such a promise. Ferdinand was going to be safe, no matter what anyone said.

I sighed in relief, and everyone else did too. They were free from my Crushing at last.

Goddess-Dyed Mana and Name-Swearing

Ferdinand peered at my face, looking as serious as ever, then muttered that my eye color had returned to normal. I thought he would be glad, but some of the urgency in his expression remained. What was going on?

“Rozemyne, it would seem you are less able to control your goddess-dyed mana. The divine power inside you swells when you get emotional. If it continues to grow, there is a chance you will cease to be yourself. Please, control your feelings as well as you can.”

The thought alone sent a shiver down my spine. Could that mean losing even more of my memories? Or something even worse? The severity with which Ferdinand spoke made me think I’d already started acting strangely in some way.

Gah! That’s terrifying!

Fear swept over me, and that was all it took. Ferdinand gasped and shouted, “Rozemyne!”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw people grimace and clutch their chests, and groans rang out from all around me. I must have been Crushing them again, but I wasn’t angry in the slightest. I’d simply felt the pangs of anxiety.

“N-No... I didn’t m-mean to...” I stammered. My fear was hurting everyone in the room, which made me even more afraid of the divine power coursing through me.

“Control your emotions, Rozemyne,” Ferdinand said, grabbing me by the shoulders and turning me so I couldn’t see everyone’s suffering. His face was twisted in pain, and sweat ran in rivulets down his brow. Even he, of all people, was in too much agony to maintain a calm expression.

“Ferdinand. Let go,” I said. “Being this close to me must make it hurt even more.” He was precious to me, and the last thing I wanted to do was cause him pain. I smacked his hands in a

desperate attempt to escape.

Ferdinand couldn't even respond anymore; he merely choked in response. The sound stirred my memories, bringing to mind vague images of when I'd stood against him and the late High Bishop in the temple. I'd just finished my baptism and was trying to protect some people... but who was I protecting now? I was hurting those around me for no good reason. My body screamed at me to stop, but I didn't know how to control the power within me.

"Use the powers you've been gifted right, and protect this city."

"I won't use them to do anything you'd get mad about. I promise."

An old vow suddenly reappeared in my mind. It felt important, somehow, and the fact I'd now broken it made me so frustrated that I wanted to cry. I couldn't let my emotions spiral even further out of control, but I didn't know how to manage them.

"Please, Ferdinand... Get away from me. I made a promise to someone, somewhere. I promised to use my powers to protect people, not hurt them."

I could tell from Ferdinand's grim pallor that more and more divine power was leaking out of me. He spluttered, and blood dripped from the corner of his mouth, once again reminding me of the past.

"GET AWAY!" I screamed, striking his hands before at last managing to wriggle out of his embrace. I shot to my feet, and my chair toppled over with a loud clatter.

How can I stop hurting everyone? How far do I need to run?

I scanned the room, looking for some way to escape. Sprinting into the corridor was an option, but the door was across the table from me; I would need to run past everyone, causing them even more pain in the process. The door behind me led to the dormitory, but I would end up crushing everyone inside. I was caught between a rock and a hard place.

Ferdinand gazed down at his hands, then wiped the blood from his mouth and turned to Sylvester. "Aub Ehrenfest! Permit Hartmut's group to enter!"

"Get in here, Hartmut!" Sylvester exclaimed to an ordonnanz. He sent it with one hand while clutching his chest with the other.

Before the bird could possibly have finished delivering its message, the door to the dormitory burst open. In came Hartmut, Clarissa, Matthias, Laurenz, Roderick, and Gretia.

"Excuse me," Hartmut said.

“No! Everyone, get away from—!”

“Fear not, Lady Rozemyne. We are enveloped in your divine mana at all times, so your heightened emotions do nothing but allow us to feel even greater divinity.”

Hartmut then gave me a reassuring smile while he and the other men circled me, separating me from the rest of the room. They must have stopped my divine mana from reaching everyone else because the groaning soon came to an end. Knowing that the others were okay helped to ease my worries.

And it doesn't look like Hartmut and my other retainers are in pain...

Hartmut and Laurenz wore encouraging smiles. Roderick and Matthias looked extremely serious, but not because my divine power was hurting them; they were just determined to carry out their duty.

“Lord Ferdinand told us to wait outside in case we were needed,” Clarissa explained, smiling so brightly that I almost thought she might start humming. “We expected the overwhelming allure of your divinity to be too much for lesser beings to bear. Aah... I always wanted to experience taking care of you like an attendant.”

She held up and spread out some silver cloth. Her bright smile eased the weight on my chest. I was glad to know there were people I could be around without needing to worry about hurting them. The fear and isolation that had been welling up inside of me began to fade.

“Lady Rozemyne,” Gretia said, “Lieseleta had the cloth fashioned into a cloak so that you could wear it more discreetly. I shall put it on you now... though it is a shame to hide your new clothes...”

Gretia fastened the cloak around my shoulders, smoothed out any lingering creases, and then wiped the last of the tears from my eyes. She normally worked in silence, so her attempt to calm me down meant she was stepping outside her comfort zone. It warmed my heart to see how much she cared.

“I thank you all ever so much.”

“Oh, Lady Rozemyne. You need not feel grateful,” Clarissa said. “Your meeting would not be able to progress if everyone fainted in awe of your stunning new form. Such is the fate of Mestionora’s avatar, who acts with the favor of each of the g—”

“Lord Ferdinand, how does it look?” Gretia asked, interrupting Clarissa’s sermon. “Leaving her face exposed will allow others to feel her divine mana without it overwhelming them.”

Ferdinand inspected the cloak and nodded. “That will do. Thank you.”

“Lady Rozemyne, might you perform some divine healing to reward your considerate retainers?” Hartmut asked with a teasing wink. Despite his bantering tone, he was watching me like a hawk, searching for the slightest reaction. He had phrased it as a joke so I could easily refuse if necessary.

“I thank you ever so much, Hartmut.”

“It is my honor.”

I cast the spell to form Flutrane’s staff, then started reciting the relevant prayer. “O Heilschmerz, subordinate to Flutrane the Goddess of Water...” I would normally have said more, but that was enough for light to emerge from the staff’s green feystone and rain down on everyone in the room.

Color returned to the faces of everyone seated around the table, and they all gasped for air. The healing had worked.

“Aah, such beauty!” Hartmut cried. “An act so holy could only ever be accredited to one with permission to use all the divine instru—”

“Good job,” Sylvester interjected, waving away the overeager scholar. “Everyone, drag Hartmut back into the dormitory. We need to continue our meeting.”

So it was done. Hartmut’s earlier air of competence seemed to vanish as Matthias and Laurenz took him by the arms and Roderick urged him out of the room. Sylvester called in attendants to replace them, then requested some fresh tea for us all. The tension among us had finally dissipated.

“Please sit down, Lady Rozemyne,” Clarissa said. I nodded and let her escort me back to my seat; Gretia had already righted my chair for me.

“Oh...”

Before sitting down, I’d made eye contact with Ferdinand. He had reached out to help me only to have his hands callously smacked away. It was so awkward that I didn’t know how to react.

“Um, Ferdinand... Are your hands okay? I, er...”

“Heilschmerz did away with any aches I might have been feeling. There is no need to get upset so soon after your retainers

calmed you down.”

Ferdinand took my hand from Clarissa’s before gesturing for my retainers to step back as he sat me back down. I stared intently at his face to make sure he really was alright; knowing him, he would claim to be fine even if my divine mana was still wearing him down.

“There is no need to fret,” Ferdinand assured me. “Now that you have your cloak, there is no chance of your mana hurting anyone.”

I grabbed the silver cloth and squeezed it tight. “I should have worn it from the start, then...”

Ferdinand exchanged a bemused glance with Sylvester. “Silver cloth invariably makes one think of the Lanzenavians, so wearing it when you first arrived at the meeting might have given the wrong impression. Now that everyone has experienced the power of your divine mana, however, not a single person will tell you to remove it.”

That might be true, but did you have to resort to something so drastic?

There must have been a solution that didn’t involve an entire room of people getting hurt. Ferdinand and Sylvester seemed to disagree, though.

“That reminds me,” Ferdinand continued. “Rozemyne, hold out your hands. If you feel you are about to lose control of your divine mana again, use this.”

“Did you plan countermeasures other than the silver cloth?”

Ferdinand gave me a sound-blocker and a white box. I went to open the latter to see what was inside, but it sucked out my mana and started turning into a white cocoon. I’d seen this happen enough times to know what I was looking at: it was a name stone.

“F-Ferdinand, what’s the meaning of this?” I asked.

“I need a way to reach you in the case of an emergency.”

“Maybe so, but you can just call others like Sylvester did, or—”

“Quiet,” Ferdinand said, pinching my cheek.

I pursed my lips. “Name-swearing isn’t meant to be done as some kind of... of... surprise attack. It’s supposed to be, like, a super important ceremony. Should you not understand its significance, considering how many have given their names to you?”

Several of my retainers had given their names to me, and not a single one of them had taken the decision lightly. Ferdinand must

have known that much, especially when Eckhart and the others in his retinue were so loyal to him. Giving me his name purely out of convenience—I saw no reason to believe he wanted me to have it—was like stomping on the sanctity of the vow. The more I thought about it, the sadder it made me.

“Keep it until the divinity fades from your mana,” Ferdinand said. “That is all I ask.”

“Still, using it as a tool is just...”

“Again, it will only be until your divinity fades. If you dislike it that much, then you can use the stone to order me to take it back.”

“I don’t want a master-servant relationship with someone who’s basically family to me...”

Drawing that line had caused drastic changes in my relationships with Philine and Damuel. The relaxed air between us had vanished along with any hope I had of becoming their friends. I didn’t even want to think about the same thing happening with Ferdinand. And above all else, I didn’t want to give him orders after seeing how bitter he was about the royal family messing him around.

“Give up for now,” Ferdinand said obstinately. “You started it by exploiting name-swearing to save my life. It will not be for long, in any case.”

He took the sound-blocker back from me and returned to his seat. It had been an emergency, but I couldn’t exactly deny that I’d taken his name to begin with. I squeezed his name stone and sighed.

“Now then, is everyone ready to continue?” Ferdinand asked once we had sipped our tea and dismissed our attendants. Sigiswald had declared that he was willing to become the Zent, so we picked up our discussion with whether he was a valid candidate.

“Does this mean Sigiswald will take the throne?” Trauerqual asked. He and Ralfrieda, his first wife, looked at Ferdinand with extreme concern. “That sounds, um...”

“If nobody else wants to volunteer, then yes. We want a royal to become the next Zent and shape Yurgenschmidt as the gods desire. If we have a viable candidate, we shall give them the crown.”

Sigiswald nodded. “I am the obvious choice, as the entire country already recognizes me as its future king. You may rest assured, Father—I shall take over as the Zent and save Yurgenschmidt.” He wore his usual calm smile, though I couldn’t

quite understand why he was acting so proud. The role would require him to dismantle his own family's rule.

"In that case," I said, "to ensure you faithfully carry out the will of the gods, we must have you swear an oath to the Goddess of Light and Gebordnung the Goddess of Order. Using contract magic, of course."

"Contract magic...?"

"Indeed. We cannot risk our new Zent ignoring the gods or postponing their demands indefinitely when my divine mana fades. Having them forge a binding agreement with the gods is the obvious solution."

The prince's contract wouldn't be with me. Instead, he would make a vow to the gods—one much stricter than any sort of agreement between humans. There wouldn't be any loopholes to exploit, and any violations would be met with divine judgment.

Sigiswald went pale. Was he afraid of contract magic or just shocked that he wouldn't be able to take advantage of us the moment he came into power?

"Oho..." Aub Dunkelfelger smiled wryly. "Anyone who agrees to carry out the gods' demands should expect to enter a contract with them."

"Indeed," his wife agreed. "Perhaps the new Zent could address the country's aubs and outline his plans for Yurgenschmidt's future before he obtains his Grutrissheit. To ensure the duchies know what is expected of them."

And with that, the magic contract was set in stone.

Sigiswald balled his hands into tight fists atop the table. If he agreed to make a vow to the gods, our discussion could move on to the newly christened transference ceremony. From there, we would outline how the other royals would be treated, how the currently deposed duchies would be divided, and so on.

There's still much to be decided...

As I wondered what we would deliberate first, Ferdinand suddenly stood up. "Prince Sigiswald, as I am sure you now understand, the next Zent will need to endure a tremendous amount of pressure when they stand atop the altar and receive the Grutrissheit from the Divine Avatar of Mestionora. If you wish to take the throne, then I must ask that you give your name to Rozemyne. Doing so will nullify the impact of her divine mana on you."

The first prince blinked. It certainly would be problematic if the new Zent collapsed midway through receiving his Grutrissheit, unable to bear my accidental Crushing.

That said... I really don't like using name-swearing for this kind of thing. This is exactly what Grandfather warned me about.

"Me, give my name?" Sigiswald asked, grimacing in disbelief. "Do you genuinely expect the new Zent to accept subservience to someone soon to become the next Aub Ahrensbach? The very idea is unthinkable."

The prince was speaking for his own sake, but he was completely right. Expecting the Zent to give his name to a mere aub was absurd. Still, Ferdinand declared that he could not trust the royal family unless they agreed.

I'm fine with them just signing a contract with the gods, but... whatever.

Trauerqual suddenly raised a hand, a bitter expression on his face.

"Yes, King Trauerqual?" I asked.

"Lady Rozemyne, my deepest apologies for the disturbance I am about to cause." He rose from his seat, then bound the first prince with bands of light.



I saw bitter tears in the king's eyes as he continued, "By all rights, Sigiswald, we should already have been executed. Yet we have been given the chance to live—and to receive the Grutrissheit from a divine avatar of the gods. Your refusal to grant her your name and commit to her demands makes you unqualified to succeed the throne, as does your displeasure about signing a contract with the gods. Open your eyes to what the rest of us saw long ago. I understand that your upbringing in a royal family that needed to persist without the Grutrissheit has colored your view of the world, but your attempts to cling to the status we no longer have are unbearably foolish and painful to witness."

Ralfrieda cast her eyes down and said nothing.

Ferdinand gazed down at the restrained Sigiswald and then at Trauerqual. "May I conclude that you have decided not to allow Prince Sigiswald to become the new Zent?"

"As he is now, I doubt he will meet the gods' criteria," the king replied, hanging his head. "He will only earn more of their ire."

Nobody spoke in the first prince's defense. He remained motionless as everyone silently agreed with his father.

Finalizing the New Zent

“Though this burden might be too great for Prince Sigiswald to bear, someone from the royal family must become the Zent for you all to be spared the Ivory Tower,” Ferdinand said. “Knowing that, do you stand by this decision?”

Trauerqual paused in thought. He gazed down at the bound prince, at his wife and other children, and then slowly knelt. “Even now that my mind has been cleansed—in fact, now more than ever—I sincerely believe that only someone who has obtained the Grutrissheit under their own power deserves to be the Zent. You ascended the altar and disappeared with the Divine Avatar of Mestionora... Do you not have it, Lord Ferdinand?”

“Father, what are you saying?!”

The king’s use of a title, coupled with his kneeling before Ferdinand, stirred all those present. The royals looked between the pair, while Aub Dunkelfelger and his wife watched Ferdinand closely to gauge his reaction.

As expected, even Dunkelfelger suspects Ferdinand of having the Book of Mestionora.

“King Trauerqual, does that mean you would not mind the entire royal family being locked up?” Ferdinand asked calmly instead of answering the question.

Anastasius stood up with a clatter, his face pale as could be. “Please stop, Father! You are the Zent! You needn’t kneel before anyone but the divine avatar!”

“A true Zent must wield a Grutrissheit.”

“Rozemyne will give us one! I want you to have it and continue your reign—I already asked as much of them. You have done more to keep this country together than any other person alive, so how could anyone else be better suited to the role?”

Anastasius tried to pull Trauerqual to his feet, but the king merely shook his head. I watched their emotional exchange for a moment, then sighed and cast my eyes on Ferdinand.

Congratulations. It went exactly as you expected.

It was almost like watching a play I'd already read the script for. I couldn't help feeling bad for Trauerqual, but Ferdinand didn't intend to be honest with him.

"King Trauerqual..." he said, "if you will forgive my rudeness, there is a serious misunderstanding at play here. The requirement for ascending the altar is not having the Grutrissheit but having divine protections from all of the primary gods."

"That is correct," Eglantine announced, drawing all eyes to herself. Nobody had expected her to interject. "I, too, climbed the altar after performing the divine protections ritual in class. I was taken to the white plaza where I obtained my schtappe, but there was nothing of note there. And of course, I do not have the Grutrissheit."

"The requirements are being omni-elemental and obtaining the divine protection of each primary god," I added, since Eglantine had stolen my line of the script.

The king's eyes widened. Being able to ascend the shrine wasn't proof of having the Grutrissheit. Hearing it from Eglantine had done more to convince him than anything I might have said.

"But even so, Lord Ferdinand—"

"Indeed," Eglantine said. "He pointed us toward the Grutrissheit in the first place, so he either has it or stopped just before obtaining it."

The pair looked at Ferdinand. I could tell from their eyes that they both wanted to know whether he had the Grutrissheit, but there were nuances to their expressions. Eglantine seemed curious, whereas Trauerqual was outright desperate.

"Prince Sigiswald truly is your son," Ferdinand told the king, staring down at him contemptuously. "The likeness is uncanny."

Everyone's expressions changed, mostly for the worse. Nobody would interpret such words as praise when Trauerqual had just moments ago described his son's behavior as "unbearably foolish and painful to witness."

Magdalena's sharp red eyes bore holes in Ferdinand. "In what ways do you think the two resemble one another?"

"Hmm. To begin with, their tendency to forget everything inconvenient to them and use their royal authority to make demands of others. Prince Sigiswald learned it from his father, I suspect. But that is not all. I see now that you fell victim to the Goddess of Chaos's curse, Lady Magdalena."

Having dismissed Magdalena as someone blinded by love, Ferdinand sneered at Trauerqual. “You seem to have forgotten this, so allow me to repeat it: I do not desire a rebellion, nor do I wish to become the Zent. Was that not clear when I agreed to marry into Ahrensbach? Or was that year and a half spent slaving away with my life on the line for nothing?”

Sylvester’s hands tightened into fists. So intense was his anger that he would probably have lunged at Trauerqual if he could.

“I determined that to be the best decision at the time,” Trauerqual forced out.

“You determined it best to essentially banish him to another duchy?” Sylvester finally snapped. “And now you want to force him to take the throne because you *think* he has the Grutrissheit, despite having zero evidence to reinforce that claim. How can you honestly believe he should not only restore Ahrensbach but also clean up the mess *your* family made? It is far too early to accept a visit from Schlaftraum.”

Sylvester had essentially said, “If you’re going to spew nonsense, don’t speak at all.” My knowledge of euphemisms had come in handy once again. Seeing him confront *the king* of all people—and with a broad smile on his face—made it abundantly clear that he was Ferdinand’s older brother.

Still, I didn’t realize King Trauerqual also had a tendency to forget whatever he found inconvenient.

Sylvester and the king were engaged in an aggressive staring contest. The former wanted to stop the royals from exploiting Ferdinand any longer, whereas the latter wanted to do what was best for Yurgenschmidt, no matter the personal cost.

A gentle voice interrupted their tense exchange.

“Lord Ferdinand—may we proceed with the understanding, then, that you have no intention of obtaining the Grutrissheit or becoming the Zent? You do not plan to accept the king’s proposal, do you?”

It was Eglantine. She wore a pleasant smile and sat with a hand resting quizzically on her cheek, but her bright orange eyes were deadly serious.

Ferdinand met her gaze and nodded. “The Divine Avatar of Mestionora gave us two options: a member of the royal family can become the Zent to answer the gods’ needs, or Aub Dunkelfelger can take the throne. No matter what King Trauerqual says, I was

never in the picture.”

“Thank you ever so much for your answer. I understand your position clearly.”

Even then, Trauerqual remained unconvinced. He repeated that someone who had obtained the Grutrissheit on their own deserved to take the throne, but Ferdinand remained completely silent.

“Um, King Trauerqual,” I said as he continued to plead. “I do not think you are wrong to want a Zent who obtained the Grutrissheit through their own power. We intend to spread the means of obtaining the Book of Mestionora so that future Zents can be chosen from those who successfully acquire it. However, for us to reach that point, I need someone in the royal family to take the reins for just one more generation.”

I focused my attention on Adolphine, Eglantine, and Magdalena. Two of them had only recently married into the royal family, and the third rarely had a chance to socialize due to being a third wife. I didn’t think any of them had committed crimes that would warrant them spending the rest of their lives in an ivory tower.

“In all senses,” I concluded, “the changes we seek to implement are more likely to be accepted if we introduce them gradually rather than all at once. The greater a change, the more resistance it will inspire.”

“Not a single noble will complain if the Zent has the Grutrissheit,” Trauerqual said.

I shook my head; he only thought that because he had spent a decade being relentlessly labeled a false king. “You have deified the Grutrissheit to an unreasonable degree. Even a Zent who has one or their own Book of Mestionora will not be immune from criticism. Humans will always find reasons to be upset; their capacity for suffering has no bounds. I want there to be as little friction and as few disputes as can be, but the transition will never be perfectly smooth. History has made that more than apparent.”

I turned my head, having felt an intense glare midway through my speech. Eglantine was staring right at me.

“Yes?” I asked.

She lowered her eyes, then directed them at Trauerqual. I could sense her determination.

“The Grutrissheit is absolutely necessary for Yurgenschmidt’s future,” she said. “To that end, I once thought it essential that we

adopt Lady Rozemyne into our family and engage her to Prince Sigiswald—so she could obtain the Grutrissheit and give it to us without issue.”

Anastasius wouldn’t have agreed to marry me; he had given up on the throne specifically for Eglantine. And trying to wed me to Hildebrand would most likely have caused another war.

“However,” she continued, “as a result of the recent incident, Lady Rozemyne can now grant the royal family the Grutrissheit as the Divine Avatar of Mestionora. We have no need to adopt her or marry her to Prince Sigiswald. King Trauerqual—this is your chance to obtain the Grutrissheit without causing any disputes. Should you not take it?”

Anastasius gazed optimistically at Trauerqual. As did the king’s wives and Adolphine, who had married into the royal family. Trauerqual, however, obstinately shook his head.

“My stance will not change,” he said. “The throne must go to someone who has obtained the Grutrissheit under their own power. I should not remain the Zent any longer.”

“I see,” Eglantine replied. “Then I understand your position as well.” She encouraged the king to return to his seat, then shot me a look of resolve. “Lady Rozemyne, I wish to take the throne. I shall give you my name and make the necessary vow to the gods. In return, I ask to be given the Grutrissheit.”

“Eglantine...” Anastasius muttered, staring at his wife in a daze.

“I cannot let the country descend into another war,” she said with a smile. “Though I admit, it would have been ideal for Prince Sigiswald to receive the Grutrissheit. As the heir apparent, he was best suited to implement slow and gradual change.”

Eglantine had wanted Sigiswald to wield the Grutrissheit and revive the old methods, paving the way for a worthy successor to take his place, while the rest of the royals devoted themselves to serving as aubs. But alas, the first prince had been deemed unsuitable for the role.

She continued, “Though his reign would most likely have been shorter than the first prince’s and thus a greater cause for concern, had the king desired the Grutrissheit, I would have considered it a suitable reward for his years of anguish.”

Despite not having a Grutrissheit, Trauerqual had fought as best he could to keep the country alive. Eglantine said she would have supported him if only he had striven to serve Yurgenschmidt as a

proper Zent and change the country as per the gods' wishes.

"Anastasius and Prince Hildebrand do not have divine protections from all of the primary gods, meaning they cannot ascend the altar with Lady Rozemyne. They had to be excluded from the start."

Anastasius and Hildebrand grimaced with regret; not being able to climb the altar had proven fatal to their chances of taking the throne. They had not been born omni-elemental, and there was no time for them to circle the shrines and pray until they obtained all the divine protections they needed.

"Though, in Anastasius's case, that was because he spent so much time helping Prince Sigiswald obtain his protections, hoping to prove that he had no intention of stealing the throne." Eglantine gave her husband a consoling smile, then turned to Ferdinand. "If Lord Ferdinand had wanted to be the Zent, whether he had the Grutrissheit or not, I would not have volunteered. I see no merit in war—especially one waged against a man the divine avatar loves."

Wait, what? "Loves"? Someone's jumping to conclusions.

I glanced at Ferdinand, debating whether I should interrupt Eglantine's teasing smile to correct her. His eyebrows were low over his eyes. On the surface, it seemed to be his usual stony countenance, but I could tell it was the face he pulled when he was genuinely displeased. Correcting her would probably be ideal.

"Lady Eglantine," I said, "Ferdinand is like family to me. If you think there are romantic feelings between us, then you are mistaken. He might be willing to endure a political marriage or the like, but he would never accept romantic love in the sense you mean."

Everyone stared at me, at a complete loss for words. Their eyes practically screamed, "Are you being serious right now?"

"Umm..."

It suddenly felt like everyone knew something I didn't.

"I'm right, aren't I, Ferdinand?!" I exclaimed, reaching out and pulling on his sleeve. "Let us dispel these misconceptions together!"

Ferdinand endured several aggressive tugs before a displeased grimace appeared on his face. It made no sense; he had taught me that letting a misunderstanding fester was the same as supporting it, so one had to intervene even when it was tedious.

"Oho. *Is she right?*" Sylvester asked.

"And why are *you* getting involved...?" Ferdinand replied.

“As your elder brother and her adoptive father, I consider it my right to know.”

“Well, you are wrong.”

Sylvester grinned, but Ferdinand returned a smile that did not reach his eyes. His talent for glaring while looking otherwise unbothered was as impressive as always.

“My apologies,” Eglantine said. “I chose my words poorly. I wished only to stress that if Lord Ferdinand had wanted the throne, I would not have volunteered.”

“Indeed, Eglantine is correct,” Ferdinand added, urging her to continue while gesturing to me to sit back down. “You stray too far from the matter at hand, Rozemyne.”

In retrospect, I really shouldn’t have dwelled on my relationship with Ferdinand; our discussion was about shaping the very future of Yurgenschmidt. He probably hadn’t said anything about the misunderstanding because he knew it would only delay us.

Oopsies.

“No, I apologize for interrupting in the first place,” I said. “Please continue.”

“If our more suitable candidates would rather not take the throne, then it falls upon me. Aub Ehrenfest suggested the royal family must clean up its own mess, and I agree; it would not be right to force the burden on anyone else. I am also a mother. If possible, I would rather live with my daughter than spend my days in a cell apart from her.”

Wait, what? Her daughter? When did this happen?!

My eyes widened in surprise. I wasn’t sure when she’d gotten pregnant or given birth, but the timing of her marriage told me her daughter was still quite young.

I didn’t realize Lady Eglantine was a mother.

In that case, becoming an aub or the Zent or whatever would indeed be much better than living apart in an ivory tower.

“We can expect Lady Eglantine’s daughter to be omni-elemental and a prime candidate to become the next Zent,” I remarked. “As long as Prince Anastasius has the resolve to support his wife, I see no reason not to grant her the Grutrissheit.”

Anastasius eyed me cautiously. “Support her in what sense?” He needn’t be so concerned, though; I was referring to the same expectations placed upon a female aub’s husband.

“You will need to carry out the duties of the Zent in Lady

Eglantine's stead when she is pregnant and on maternity leave. To that end, the two of you will not be able to have any more children until you can take her place—that is, until you have obtained the divine protections of all the primary gods. It should not take you long if you circle the shrines with a glut of rejuvenation potions.”

To support the Zent, one needed only to become omni-elemental; having one's own Book of Mestionora was by no means necessary. I wanted to encourage Anastasius to do his best for Eglantine. His cheek twitched for some reason, but still—he would do anything for his beloved wife and daughter. I trusted that he would go to any lengths to grant Eglantine's wishes.

“If we agree that Lady Eglantine should become the Zent, then we will start by hiding the royal family's crimes as best we can,” I said. “Could we conceal the fact that Prince Hildebrand obtained his schtappe and pretend it never happened?”

Magdalena stared at us in surprise.

I continued, “It seems unfair to further punish the third prince when everyone else in his family will get to bury their crimes and continue to live as nobles, however hard those lives might be. Could we turn his bracelets into a ring that serves the same purpose, allowing his schtappe to be sealed until the time comes for him to obtain it with his classmates?”

“His retainers could modify the bracelets to make that an option, but...” Ferdinand gave me a sharp look that forced me to avert my eyes. “You are as overly lenient as ever.”

From there, he turned to the rest of the room. “Indeed, as Rozemyne suggests, there is much room for compassion when it comes to the third prince. In addition to his youth, he was most likely isolated from the chain of communication, and none of the adults around him ever thought to be on guard against Raublut. It would not be fair for a mere child to face punishment when those in his family who knew better are being allowed to wipe the slate clean. His crimes, at least, can go unseen.”

Everyone remained silent as Ferdinand gazed upon Magdalena. There was a more critical glint in his eyes.

“Lady Magdalena, we cannot be surprised that a young child trusted the words of the knight commander when even his retainers were fooled. That said, had he understood the quality of schtappes and why the age for obtaining them was raised, he would not have been so foolish as to commit this crime in the first place. Third

prince or no, I must conclude that you failed with his education.”

Hildebrand paled, while Magdalena cast her eyes down. “That is correct,” she said. “I did not educate him as well as I should have.”

Wait, what? I told Prince Hildebrand why the curriculum was changed when we were in the underground archive. I even said as much to Ferdinand when we were interrogating Alstede.

I cocked my head at Ferdinand. Was he trying to spare Hildebrand some of the blame by attributing as much fault as he could to the adults? I certainly wasn’t going to correct him this time; doing so would force him to respond that the prince was more foolish than he’d thought and push the conversation toward making the punishment even harsher. Instead, I took another approach.

“Worry not, Ferdinand—Lady Eglantine becoming the Zent means King Trauerqual can become an aub. The royal family will soon cease to exist, and if we encourage Prince Hildebrand to learn from Dunkelfelger, I am sure he can still grow into a fine archduke candidate.”

Lestilaut and Hannelore were both exceptionally above-average archduke candidates. And as Magdalena was from Dunkelfelger, I saw no reason why she wouldn’t be able to remedy the prince’s poor education going forward.

“Um, Roze— *Lady Rozemyne*...” Hildebrand muttered, clearly anxious. “Would you support me becoming a Zent in the future?”

It seemed next to impossible for Hildebrand to obtain the Book of Mestionora, but there was nothing wrong with providing a little motivation. I opened my mouth to say that I would... only to be cut short by Ferdinand.

“Enough,” he said. “You cannot show favoritism while here as the Divine Avatar of Mestionora. Young though the prince might be, he must be told the truth.” I was being lectured without even having said anything.

“I understand what you mean, but is it really necessary to crush his dreams in front of everyone?”

“Is it not more cruel to give him false hope? How long would you let him go before revealing that he aspires to the impossible?”

“The impossible?!” Hildebrand repeated, his eyes widening.

Ferdinand refused to mince his words. “The schtappe you obtained is no better than those of the old generation.”

The next generation’s Zent would need to secure the Book of

Mestionora through their own power. Once the method for acquiring it and the importance of prayer were spread during the Archduke Conference, the younger students would no doubt start dedicating themselves to compressing their mana and procuring more elements before their third year. Compared to the schtappes they would obtain, one obtained before even entering the Royal Academy would be of awfully low quality.

Ferdinand continued, "In your case, Prince Hildebrand, if you overcompress your mana or pray too much, your mana will exceed your schtappe's capacity and become impossible to control. Rozemyne experienced the same problem after performing the divine protections ceremony in her third year."

"But she seems okay now," Hildebrand replied. "There must be a way..."

"Rozemyne was omni-elemental to begin with and able to enter the shrines of the primary gods. The same cannot be said for you. Even as you grow, your schtappe's capacity will remain severely limited—a most crippling blight on your future as a noble. The hardships this will cause you are the unseen burden you will need to carry for the rest of your life."

Hildebrand scrunched up his face, on the verge of tears. "In other words, I can't become a Zent?"

"You will understand why if you learn the ancient language and read the documents in the underground archive. In the past, students obtained their schtappes during their final year, and those who did not pray enough to obtain the divine protections of all the primary gods were unable to take the throne. You obtained your schtappe before gaining all the elements, so the same is true for you."

The third prince hung his head, overcome with despair. His mother and father furrowed their brows in frustration, but they weren't the only ones; Dunkelfelger's archducal couple looked just as regretful.

Rewards and the Criminals

Silence dominated the room as everyone wondered what to say to Hildebrand, who was weeping with his head in his hands. Ferdinand soon lost his patience and gave an annoyed sigh.

“A crying child is unwelcome here. Take him away if he cannot keep his composure. Though we have the entire evening ahead of us, that is not much time for everything we need to discuss. Rozemyne, if you would continue.”

I thought there were better ways to deal with a crying child, but Ferdinand taking the cold approach didn’t surprise me in the slightest. Besides, he was right—we still needed to decide a date for the transference ceremony, what information we would reveal to the duchies, how to treat the prisoners, and which royal would take care of which deposed duchy.

Magdalena took Hildebrand out of the room.

“As we have decided on the new Zent, let us begin discussing the future,” I said, then turned my attention to the man still restrained on the floor. “Prince Sigiswald, I would rather you return to your seat. We cannot leave a future aub bound while we are discussing the new territories and their borders.”

“You would allow him to become an aub after he was so disrespectful toward you?” Trauerqual asked, looking at both Ferdinand and me. “Are you certain, Lady Rozemyne?”

I smiled and nodded. “Prince Sigiswald is royalty. I, on the other hand, am only a member of an archducal family. A goddess might have dyed my mana, but the prince’s uncouth behavior toward someone of lower status is not worth punishing. If we did take action, we would need to punish both his wives as well, would we not? I would rather avoid that outcome.”

I’m sick of women being disciplined for the actions of their husbands.

If we charged Sigiswald with a crime, his wives would end up in a position even worse than being demoted to archducal family members. Letting him become an aub made the most sense to me.

Anywhere he fell short, his spouses would surely do their best to educate him.

Or so I thought. Adolphine looked exceptionally concerned, like she wasn't best pleased with the future I'd proposed for her.

"As we have seen, Prince Sigiswald does not know how to respect his superiors," she said. "Would becoming the aub of a deposed duchy not be too great a burden for him?"

I shook my head. "We promised to grant your family the Grutrissheit in a way that hides its involvement in the recent conflict. Moreover, though Prince Sigiswald was deemed unfit to take the throne, he has not committed any crimes of note."

"I see..."

Adolphine raised her head just enough to look at me. I could tell she was quietly contemplating something. Her searching amber eyes reminded me of Eglantine's moments before she had volunteered to become the next Zent.

"If the first prince causes problems after becoming an aub," I said, "the new Zent will punish him accordingly. He will not find it easy to adjust to his new life, but I trust he will quickly learn how to carry himself."

"You truly are compassionate."

Trauerqual untied Sigiswald while instructing him to be grateful for my kindness. The first prince must have realized how much his status had changed after watching the discussion proceed without him, as he carefully thanked me before taking his seat. Magdalena returned around the same time, having handed Hildebrand to his retainers.

I'm not acting out of compassion, though.

If we had kept Sigiswald tied up, it would probably have delayed our plan for the royals to become aubs of the deposed duchies. And the more time Ferdinand spent trying to work around that, the less time he spent on Operation: Library City. I wanted to sort out this conversation, hand over the Grutrissheit, restore my memories, and get started on my new project. That was all.

"Let us discuss the details of the transference ceremony," I said. "Nobles from every duchy have gathered to gain intelligence, so I must ask Lady Eglantine to make her name stone as promptly as she can. Once it is ready, we shall perform the transference ceremony for presenting the Grutrissheit and the acknowledgment ceremony with the aubs." Because the aubs were already at the Academy, we

could take care of all the ceremonies necessary for the crowning of a new Zent.

“Is there a need to hurry?” Eglantine asked. “If we inform the aubs that the Divine Avatar of Mestionora is granting me the Grutrissheit, the ceremonies can wait until the Archduke Conference. We might not have time to prepare the auditorium any sooner.”

Ferdinand shook his head, his gaze stern. “The goddess’s mana will not last that long. Besides, Rozemyne is to be recognized as an aub during the coming Archduke Conference. She cannot act as one while her mana remains dyed, which is already causing her problems with the creation of registration brooches, among other things. At this rate, Ahrensbach will not be able to participate at all. Would you have me spend another year working there without a proper aub, knowing all that I endured under that incompetent fool of an archduke candidate?”

“Of course not... I thought preparing the ceremonies at such short notice might be too great of a burden. But I see now that Ahrensbach views the situation quite differently.”

Eglantine had wanted to ease the burden on her retainers, the Sovereign nobles, and the aubs who had gathered so abruptly. That wasn’t a bad thing—many would thank her for encouraging a more reasonable pace—but if she overruled us using her status as a royal, Ahrensbach would end up in a truly awful situation.

“You can cause great problems for others simply by voicing an opinion,” Ferdinand said. “The word of the Zent bears that much weight. For now, we shall prioritize the needs of the Divine Avatar of Mestionora over those of the royal family.” His expression said it was time for the royals to put someone else first for a change.

Eglantine nodded, wearing a solemn expression.

“Prepare the stage and altar in time for the transference ceremony,” Ferdinand continued. “It should not take long if the Sovereign scholars and priests work together. As you are soon to be the Sovereign High Bishop, Lady Eglantine, I would advise that you ask your husband to support you.”

“Am I going to the Sovereign temple *again*...?” Anastasius muttered, his face contorting in a grimace. He must have expected it, though, as he agreed without much resistance.

“As I recall, the suggestion was made during last year’s Archduke Conference that Rozemyne be made the Sovereign High

Bishop. I see no reason why Lady Eglantine or Prince Anastasius cannot perform the role.”

The couple glanced at Sigiswald, removing any doubt about who within the royal family had proposed the idea.

“Lady Eglantine—once you are the Zent, the current Sovereign temple will start being dismantled, and the one in the Academy will need to be restored. Do what you can to make it accessible. You are to become its High Bishop and set an example for the duchies to follow.”

Ferdinand was saying that if the royals disliked the temple so much, this was their chance to rebuild it to their preferences. The two of us had been restructuring Ehrenfest’s temple ever since Bezewanst died, so there was no reason a Zent couldn’t do the same.

“And as for you, Prince Anastasius, there is nothing to worry about,” Ferdinand continued. “Any negative associations with the temple will dissipate. Soon, every aub in the country will clamor to reconstruct their temple.”

We planned to reveal the foundations’ true locations and the role of the bible during the upcoming Archduke Conference. Once that happened, it was hard to envision anyone looking down on Eglantine for visiting the Sovereign temple.

“Furthermore, heading to the Sovereign temple will give you an excellent opportunity to inform the priests of the temple’s closure and their transfer. The blue priests and shrine maidens taken from the duchies after the civil war will get a chance to return home, should their aubs desire it. The Royal Academy’s temple will not need too many of them once prayer becomes more common among the students. Of course, the same cannot be said for the gray priests tasked with manual labor.”

Every single duchy was facing a mana shortage to some degree, so I doubted many aubs would refuse to take back their blue priests and shrine maidens. The change would also free up some of the Sovereignty’s budget.

“You make it sound so simple, but what about the Zent’s living quarters?” Anastasius asked. “There is nowhere at the Royal Academy for Eglantine to stay.”

Ferdinand smiled. “Are you forgetting the villa Rozemyne was to receive as the king’s adopted daughter? The furniture and overall decor are fit for a princess, at the very least.”

“You cannot be serious...”

Ferdinand gave an even broader grin, indicating that he was indeed serious. Anastasius gritted his teeth in response while Eglantine blinked in confusion.

As all the men of the royal family went pale, I gave a smile of my own. “King Trauerqual and Prince Sigiswald prepared the villa for me; it should do as a temporary residence until the country is more stable and you have enough excess mana to perform an *entwickeln* for yourselves.”

We were using the villa to move between Ahrensbach and the Royal Academy and to hold various criminals, but we intended to have the Ahrensbach Dormitory up and running before the Archduke Conference, and our captives could just be moved to actual cells in the Sovereignty. They could even bring the bedding and such they were already using with them.

“As we have concluded that there are, in fact, living quarters on the Royal Academy’s grounds, let us move to the next topic,” I said. “Lady Eglantine will need to dye the foundation swiftly upon inheriting the Grutrissheit. If she does not finish in time for the Archduke Conference, we will not be able to redraw borders or punish criminals. There is far too much that cannot be done with the Grutrissheit alone.”

Eglantine nodded and muttered, “First the name-swearing. Then the transference ceremony. *Then* dyeing the foundation.”

“I should also note that Gervasio, the leader of Lanzenave’s invasion force, is currently imprisoned within Gilessenmeyer’s country gate,” Ferdinand interjected. “He will, at some point, need to be retrieved.”

“Is that task not best suited to Lady Rozemyne, who can teleport between the gates?” Anastasius asked. Though he spoke politely, he was openly glaring at Ferdinand. He must not have wanted us to unload any more work on him.

“I am forbidden from leaving the dormitory in my current state,” I said. “As you have seen, when I am not wearing silver cloth, unexpected problems can arise.”

“Moreover,” Ferdinand added, “Lady Eglantine has achieved nothing of worth since the war began. She should at least capture the enemy leader, no?”

Though she had likely been defending her villa, that paled in comparison to Anastasius fighting in the auditorium and Magdalena

smiting Raublut. Having a clear, meaningful accomplishment to her name would play a crucial role in convincing the country's nobles to accept her.

Ferdinand continued, "Gervasio's schtappe has already been sealed, and as he was imprisoned three days ago, I imagine he has weakened to some degree. He should survive another week or so, depending on the number and quality of rejuvenation potions at his disposal. I recommend taking around ten knights when going to capture him."

Judging by the instant-death poison he had tried to use atop the altar, Gervasio probably had other Lanzenavian tools he could surprise us with. Ferdinand warned that Eglantine would probably be attacked as soon as she teleported in.

"On the other hand, if we do not need his memories to convict any criminals, we could simply leave him there. Murder was forbidden by the gods, but they said nothing about natural deaths."

Ferdinand must not think highly of Gervasio to propose letting him starve to death...

"That said," Ferdinand continued, "Gervasio knows much about obtaining the Grutrissheit. I would propose that Lady Eglantine view his memories; they could prove crucial to her future as the next Zent."

"Enough," Anastasius snapped, no longer able to contain his frustration. "Even considering the circumstances, the memories of the Lanzenavians are too much for Eglantine to bear."

"The duties of the throne are not light, by any means. It is your role as Lady Eglantine's husband to help her carry that burden, not run away from it."

The couple swallowed hard. Trauerqual, who had created this predicament to begin with by abandoning his duties as the Zent, apologetically lowered his gaze.

"Now, as for the criminals other than Gervasio..."

I was trying to move our conversation along when Ferdinand stood up and gave a cloth-covered registration medal to Eglantine. "I retrieved this from the Sovereign temple. It belongs to the Lanzenavian king who did not come to Yurgenschmidt. As the future Zent, it falls to you to destroy it."

"Oh my..." Eglantine said, cocking her head as she accepted the medal. "Should we not at least attempt to negotiate with Lanzenave? We could demand reparations and get them to take full

responsibility for the incident.”

“Lanzenavians view Yurgenschmidt nobles not as humans but as a means to obtain mana. They were confirmed to be advancing the development of mana-sealing tools and instant-death poison, among other weapons. If you demand reparations, do so only with the understanding that any delegates you send are likely to be imprisoned or murdered for their feystones. As someone who has dealt with Lanzenavians in Ahrensbach, I consider it best to close the country gate and leave them to their own devices.”

The royals froze. They had witnessed and experienced the impact of trug on the Sovereign nobles, but they hadn’t encountered instant-death poison, nor had they received detailed reports about the slaughter of Ahrensbach nobles using silver cloth and weapons or the mass kidnapping of noblewomen. In short, they didn’t understand the true threat that Lanzenave posed.

I decided to weigh in as an aub.

“Considering the danger, I refuse to open the gate to Lanzenave or send anyone from Ahrensbach as an envoy. In fact, I would rather the gate lead somewhere else. Lady Eglantine—I will not protest if you wish to prepare a delegation of Sovereign nobles and send them to Lanzenave, but I will charge you to use our ships.”

Asking for money seemed reasonable enough. I doubted the ships would ever return, and the more funds I could put toward my library city, the better.

“Do you not intend to send the Lanzenavian prisoners back home?” Sigiswald asked. “Keeping too many will cause problems in terms of security and expenses.”

Though I wouldn’t have minded returning them to Lanzenave, I shook my head. “Erwaermen has not permitted us to refuse those who came to Yurgenschmidt in search of asylum. He does not mind us treating them in accordance with the rules of our society, but we cannot expel them after they went to so much trouble to come here and obtain their schtappes.”

I repeated what Erwaermen had told us about the country’s founding and the contrast between divine and mortal perspectives. Everyone sighed in response.

“It makes the most sense for the royal family to punish those responsible for the war,” Ferdinand said. “Their crimes exceed Ahrensbach’s jurisdiction.”

To prevent anyone from blaming the royals for allowing the

Lanzenave invasion, we had to stress how much they had participated in the fight and make it known that they were the ones who captured the criminals.

“Mass executions were carried out during the purge that followed the civil war, wiping out not just those deemed to be criminals but also those associated with them,” Sieglinde remarked. “The nobles of the losing duchies will not be pleased to hear that traitors who abetted an invasion of the Royal Academy are being allowed to live. How do you intend to mitigate their outrage?”

This wasn’t pleasant to discuss, but it needed to be done. I sat up straight and prepared to answer.

“Though the gods have forbidden us from executing anyone in the aftermath of this incident, I doubt that will change how the nobles feel. As the old adage goes, the law is not in heaven. To punish them severely enough to satisfy the country’s aubs and to prevent them from ever being treated as nobles again, I think we should destroy their medals while they are in another duchy.”

“So... destroy their schtappes?” Adolphine asked. “Are the Lanzenavians registered as Yurgenschmidt nobles?”

I nodded. “One cannot obtain a schtappe otherwise. To that end, Alstede registered them all as Ahrensbach nobles. By destroying their medals while they are still in the Sovereignty, I could remove their noble authority without taking their lives. Would anyone be opposed to this?”

Nobody was.

“I intend to have the criminals dedicate their mana to Yurgenschmidt’s various duchies,” I said. “Dunkelfelger and the royal family can discuss how many each duchy should receive. Lady Eglantine will make the final decision when she becomes the Zent.”

By involving Dunkelfelger in the process, we would give them more authority moving forward and prevent Klassenberg from butting in. According to Ferdinand, at least; I was just reciting his script.

Trauerqual gave me a grave nod. “Consider it done.”

By making the royals do all the tedious work, I could devote my attention to destroying the medals and punishing the Lanzenave soldiers who had rampaged through Ahrensbach. I was relieved not to have been saddled with any of the emotionally exhausting duties.

“We will also need to discuss how Lady Eglantine will redraw the borders after becoming the Zent, as King Trauerqual and Prince

Sigiswald need to be assigned duchies to rule,” I said.

Ferdinand formed his schtappe and used his mana to draw a map in the air. I gestured toward it and continued.

“The only land the Zent is supposed to rule is the centermost portion of the Sovereignty: the Royal Academy. To minimize the burden on Lady Eglantine, we can shave away the extra territory the royal family acquired for the sake of establishing their villas. The part of Old Werkestock under Ahrensbach’s management, all of Old Scharfer, and a portion of the current Sovereignty can be combined into a single duchy that King Trauerqual will oversee. Old Trostwerk and another portion of the Sovereignty can be merged for Prince Sigiswald.”

Ferdinand complemented my explanation by redrawing the borders as I’d proposed. Old Scharfer was combined with Ahrensbach’s part of Old Werkestock to its south.

“On top of that,” I said, “the land given to the duchies on the winning side of the civil war needs to be properly incorporated into their territories. The aubs cannot rule them otherwise. Dunkelfelger should take this opportunity to decide what they want to do with their portion of Old Werkestock. They could outright refuse it if doing so better suits their duchy’s interests.”

I turned to Dunkelfelger’s archducal couple for their opinion; they had contributed so much to our victory that we would respect whatever decision they made. A short discussion followed, and they elected to have their border redrawn to officially include the proposed section of Old Werkestock. Eglantine remarked that Klassenberg would probably make the same call with Old Zausengas, and that was that.

“As the new Zent, I wish to reward those who secured our win against the invaders,” Eglantine said. “Dunkelfelger, is there anything else we can give you? If you desire more land, we can make further changes to the map.”

The response came not from the aub but from Sieglinde: “We do not need any more land than we have been given. Instead, we request more authority than Klassenberg even after you rise to the throne. Let their rank be at least one place below ours for the entirety of your reign.”

Klassenberg hadn’t contributed to this war in the slightest, but its influence and authority would still grow when Eglantine became the Zent. Dunkelfelger wished to prevent that.

“But of course,” Eglantine replied with a calm smile. “Obtaining the Grutrisheit and taking the throne would never have been an option for me without you, Ehrenfest, and Lady Rozemyne’s Ahrensbach. Aub Klassenberg raised me never to let a debt go unpaid, so that should not be a problem at all. And as for you, Ehrenfest? You have no interest in receiving more land, so what can we give you?”

“Your word that the royal family will not proceed with Rozemyne’s adoption to King Trauerqual,” Sylvester replied. “It no longer makes sense, considering that one is the avatar of a goddess and the other is soon to be an aub. That said, we wish to keep everything we were given in return for agreeing to the adoption in the first place.”

In short, the adoption wouldn’t happen, but Ehrenfest would get to keep the magic tools for its children and the restriction that nobles could only marry *into* the duchy.

“I would not have been able to adopt an avatar anyway...” Trauerqual said, announcing that he was also content with abandoning the plan.

Eglantine nodded. “And what do *you* desire, Lady Rozemyne?”

“Your cooperation in the construction of my library city. To be more precise, once the printing industry has spread, I ask that all duchies be ordered to send copies of each new book they create to Ahrensbach.”

“Is that all...?” Eglantine looked at Ferdinand with concern. It was strange that she was consulting him; she had asked *me* what *I* wanted.

“Yes, that will do,” Ferdinand replied. “Let us be glad she did not order the construction of a new library equipped with a Zent teleportation circle in every single duchy.”

As much as I still wanted to move freely between the country’s libraries, I recognized that it wasn’t really feasible right now. I remembered getting shouted at over the idea, and there were some things I shouldn’t ask for while everyone was acknowledging me as an avatar of a goddess.

“As for me,” Ferdinand said, “I ask that Ahrensbach’s name and duchy color be changed after Rozemyne becomes its aub.”

“Your requests are acknowledged. Lady Rozemyne, please put some thought into the name you choose. We cannot have two Ehrenfests.”

Under normal circumstances, when a foundation was stolen, the duchy would take the name of the new aub's house. I was adopted, however, which meant we would end up with a second Ehrenfest. Eglantine was letting me come up with another name to remedy this.

I wonder what I should call it... This is kind of exciting!

Adolphine's Push

I was gleefully considering the name of my library city when Adolphine raised a hand. "Now that everyone's rewards have been decided, I request permission to speak."

"Granted, of course," I said.

Adolphine looked at Trauerqual and Sigiswald. "This would ordinarily be kept within the royal family... but it must be said that I married Prince Sigiswald to connect Drewanchel to the next Zent. By losing his claim to the throne, he might have breached our contract."

"He breached it...?" I asked.

"Indeed. If the prince becomes an aub, neither my duchy nor I will gain anything from our union, thereby violating the contract we made at the time of our engagement. He is not entirely to blame, but a breach is a breach. I wish to borrow Mestionora's wisdom so that no one is punished by the Goddess of Light."

I cocked my head at her, unsure what she hoped to gain from this. Ferdinand must have detected my confusion because he gave his temple a few taps and translated.

"So you want a guarantee that Drewanchel will receive the benefits of marrying a Zent even though Prince Sigiswald is becoming an aub."

"Indeed," she said with a smile. "Or I would ask Lady Rozemyne to recognize our divorce as the one who performed our Starbinding." The look in her eyes reminded me of Gundolf when he was advancing his research.

"You may discuss the matter in our absence. Rozemyne is under no obligation to make promises about a contract between your husband and you."

"I am aware," Adolphine replied, still smiling. "But her involvement cannot be overlooked. Following the civil war, Klassenberg and Dunkelfelger were given land to reward their involvement. This was not an option for Drewanchel, so we were given a chance to increase our authority by sending archnobles to

the Sovereignty.”

Klassenberg and Dunkelfelger had endured many hardships trying to manage territories outside their borders, while Drewanchel had struggled to fill the void made by sending so many archnobles to the Sovereignty.

Adolphine continued, “Redrawing the borders will allow Klassenberg and Dunkelfelger to properly absorb the territories they manage. In turn, the Sovereignty is going to shrink. What will happen to the nobles there when the Sovereign temple moves to the Royal Academy?” Klassenberg and Dunkelfelger were keeping their rewards from the civil war, and she wanted to make sure the same was true for Drewanchel.

Ferdinand drew his eyebrows together in a frown. “We plan to temporarily return all Sovereign nobles not in the royal family’s service to their duchies during the move to the Academy and the assignment of new aubs. Once everything is done, the duchies will send nobles as before, but Lady Eglantine and Prince Anastasius will decide which ones are accepted. From that point on, Sovereign nobles will stay in the dormitories of their respective duchies.”

Adolphine nodded, having anticipated that answer. “I thought the Sovereign nobles would be sent back, considering that the blue priests are due to be returned. I do not disagree with any of these changes—it makes sense for the new Zent to choose which nobles shall work for her, and moving them into their dormitories will reduce the burden on her in many regards—but I cannot ignore their impact on Drewanchel. We will lose not only the benefits promised to us by my contract but also our reward for participating in the civil war. I will need to discuss the matter with the aub.”

“I understand your position well,” I said, unable to hold my tongue. “Lady Eglantine, King Trauerqual, Prince Sigiswald—think carefully about how best to reward Drewanchel.”

“Rozemyne, this is not a matter for you to speak on,” Ferdinand interjected with a hard glare. Because of my goddess-dyed mana, anything I said would be interpreted as a divine order, but I didn’t regret my decision.

“I understand that, but I empathize with Lady Adolphine’s urgency and desperation. Please allow me to provide some insight. Imagine my adoption into the royal family went ahead, but Ehrenfest never received what they were promised in return.”

If the Zent had adopted me only to be demoted to the rank of

an aub, and the rewards promised to Ehrenfest had never materialized, I, too, would have been ranting about a breach of contract. It was even worse for Adolphine; not only was her duchy being denied payment, but it would also need to bear a greater burden when assisting with the construction of the new duchies.

Of course, our situations aren't exactly the same. Divorce has a tremendous impact on a woman's reputation.

"Lady Adolphine," I continued. "Your marriage was political, and your concerns are valid, but would rushing into a divorce be wise? Given the impact it might have on your duchy's plans and your future, I would encourage you to give it more thought." Drewanchel and the royal family must have both agreed that her engagement was best for the balance of power in Yurgenschmidt; they would need to be consulted before anyone took action.

"Naturally. The final decision would not be made here and now but after a discussion between my parents in Drewanchel and the royal family during the upcoming Archduke Conference. I elected to mention it because my Starbinding was performed using ancient methods. I thought my divorce might need to be done the same way."

Adolphine's marriage had survived an entire year—long enough for her and Sigiswald to grow close, I thought—but it seemed she was already set on divorce.

Hmm... I guess this is just how things are in this world.

Did an arranged marriage need to end if the deal it was founded on fell through? The couple had wed over a year ago, so I thought it might be better for them to keep supporting each other. It wasn't my marriage, though, nor was it my decision to make; Adolphine understood her situation more than I ever would.

"Just a moment," I said. "I can check."

I made my Book of Mestionora and searched for any information I could find about divorces. Sigiswald spoke with Adolphine in the background; based on his remarks, he didn't want them to separate.

"Adolphine, have we not already spent an entire year together?" the first prince asked. "I did not think you were so obsessed with obtaining royal status..." He was trying to chastise her for being so heartless, but she merely blinked in confusion.

"Are you really so taken aback? Our union was political from the outset, arranged with the understanding that I would marry the

country's next Zent. Obtaining royal status was always my focus; we were never even a couple."

"We gained the blessings of the supreme gods, did we not? And what will your future hold if you divorce me so soon after coming of age? You might not find anyone else and end up stuck in Drewanchel for the rest of your life."

Adolphine looked sincerely troubled. She made to respond, then paused; though they weren't on the same page, their marriage and its problems weren't to be discussed in this public arena. She must have given up on trying to explain her perspective because she merely smiled and said, "Prince Sigiswald, anyone would grasp at Dregarnuhr's threads if she dangled them so clearly. Not even Liebeskhilfe could resist their allure." She wouldn't let this opportunity to divorce him slip through her fingers.



I wonder how they ended up like this. Like, ouch... Adolphine said they weren't even a couple.

As much as I wanted to find out, this was a matter between their houses. It seemed rude of me to pry. I gazed up from my Book of Mestionora to address them.

“Lady Adolphine—according to my research, the traditional means of divorce should still work for you. Please note, however, that you will find it harder to obtain the supreme gods’ blessings.” A normal prayer would earn them only half as many blessings as usual.

“I thank you ever so much for your time, Lady Rozemyne. Your insight is most useful.”

Adolphine knew the supreme gods would grant her less favor if she divorced the first prince, but that didn’t change the resolve in her amber eyes. She got Eglantine and Trauerqual to promise they would set up a meeting with Drewanchel to discuss the matter. It was admirable, really.

“A name stone should take no more than three days to complete,” Ferdinand said, returning our focus to Eglantine. “Thus, I would advise holding the transference ceremony and your debut as a Zent four days from now. Like other rituals, they can begin at third bell.”

“Four days from now?!” Eglantine cried. Her shock was a little unwarranted, if you asked me; four days was plenty of time. In fact, coming from Ferdinand, it could even be considered generous.

“Name stones are trivial to make,” I said, “and procuring the ingredients should not be a problem for a royal. The prayer and method to regenerate gathering spots were taught during the last Archduke Conference, so you need not even worry about scarcity. Two days would be more than enough time.”

Ferdinand nodded in agreement. “Two days was my original plan, but you would not be ready for the ceremonies. Especially as you need to practice your whirling.”

“Aah, I get it now...” I muttered. “Three or four days of practice wouldn’t have been enough when people are comparing me to Lady Eglantine. But even then...”

Though I was finally able to whirl without falling over, I still occasionally wavered. Having to keep up with Eglantine, of all

people, was going to be tough. I tried asking for more time to practice, but Ferdinand refused.

“You will need to make do,” he said. “If we are not careful, we will not make it back to Ahrensbach in time for Spring Prayer. This year’s harvest will catastrophically fail.”

“Oh, right... But what about our clothes?”

Ferdinand cocked an eyebrow at me like I’d just asked the dumbest question in the world. “Lady Eglantine has her clothes from her coming-of-age and Starbinding. And as your role is to present her with the Grutrissheit, you can wear your ceremonial High Bishop robes.”

I was okay with that; I was used to wearing them, and we wouldn’t need to worry about them being ready in time. Liesele and the others could fetch them from Ahrensbach for me.

“Lady Eglantine,” Ferdinand said, “please wear feystone shoes for your whirling. The pillar of light will not form without mana.”

“Should I wear some too?” I asked.

“There is enough divine mana spilling out of you that the material of your shoes will not matter. Do as you please.”

Huh? Am I leaking that much mana?

It hadn’t even occurred to me, but there must have been a lot. My current state was so abnormal that even pillars of light would form on their own.

“To provide extra support, Hartmut shall participate as the High Priest,” Ferdinand continued. “Shall we let the royal family borrow him from tomorrow until the day of the ceremonies so he can educate Prince Anastasius?”

“Hold on!” Sylvester yelled. “You plan to have *Hartmut* educate Prince Anastasius?!” That meant putting an Ehrenfest archnoble above a member of royalty.

Ferdinand glanced at his brother, then at Anastasius. “Hartmut knows more about religious ceremonies than anyone else we can spare.”

“Is *your* knowledge not superior?” Anastasius asked. He probably thought it would be easier to learn from an archduke candidate than an archnoble from another duchy, but Ferdinand shot down the idea at once.

“It is, but I do not have time to teach you; I must instruct the nobles of Ahrensbach in Rozemyne’s stead. If you are displeased with needing Hartmut’s assistance or think you can prepare the

transference ceremony at such short notice without him, I will not object. You can make do with those of the Sovereign temple.”

According to Ferdinand, the Sovereign High Bishop was basically on the verge of death. His blue priests wouldn’t be of much use to the second prince when the temple was in such a sorry state, making Hartmut’s assistance crucial.

Ferdinand put the royals in his debt while simultaneously blocking their escape route. How evil...

Still, I couldn’t just sit here in silence; he was lending the royals one of *my* retainers.

“Prince Anastasius—if you want Hartmut for the next four days, I will need to charge the royal family for his services.”

Sylvester and the others were stunned, but I refused to budge. Not even the Lord of Evil could suppress my merchant spirit.

“On another note,” I said, “I promised Lady Hannelore that I would invite her to watch me hand over the Grutrissheit. Aub Dunkelfelger, be sure to bring her with you to the ceremonies.”

“As you wish,” the aub replied.

I was prepared to move on, but Trauerqual raised a hand in search of permission to speak. “Lady Rozemyne. I have a suggestion.”

“Yes?”

“Could we invite all the archduke candidates currently enrolled at the Academy? This seems like a perfect opportunity for those closest to becoming the next generation’s Zent to learn the importance of religious ceremonies and the Grutrissheit’s divinity.”

Going forward, students would need to pray to the gods and work to acquire as many elements as they could. Trauerqual thought that a demonstration of the path to the throne would play a crucial role in reforming the country’s temples.

Sylvester contemplated the idea, then nodded. “I agree with King Trauerqual. However, I propose that we invite *all* baptized archduke candidates, even those who are still too young to attend the Academy. I imagine Melchior, the current High Bishop in Ehrenfest, would also appreciate the chance to see Rozemyne’s ceremonies.”

A gentle smile spread across my face. I would need to put my all into serving as a good example for Melchior.

“Given that brooches and such will need to be prepared for those who have yet to enroll, we can let the aubs of each duchy

decide whether they wish to bring their seven-, eight-, and nine-year-olds,” I said. “I should note, however, that I think children have much to gain from experiencing religious ceremonies at a young age.”

“And what will you do if problems arise because of children that young participating?” Ferdinand asked me with his usual glare.

I shrugged. “Back in Ehrenfest, recently baptized apprentice blues watched our ceremonies without issue. I see no reason to worry about well-bred archduke candidates. Even if something does happen, the blame will rest with the parents. The aubs get to decide who participates, after all.”

A misbehaving child spoke to a poor education, so the aubs would only bring those they could trust not to shame them. In short, there was basically zero risk of us encountering any issues.

“As far as rituals go,” I said, “the transference ceremony is irregular—not like the yearly Starbinding and such. It will serve no purpose for future generations who obtain their own Books of Mestionora. Because it should never need to be repeated, I see nothing wrong with letting the younger children participate just this once.”

Ferdinand rapped a finger on his temple. “I wonder... Did you only make this grand, admirable gesture because you want to impress your younger siblings?”

Well spotted, Ferdinand. Guess I can't pull the wool over your eyes.

Once we'd agreed to let all the baptized archduke candidates participate, we went over the details of the ceremonies before bringing our meeting to a close.

Eglantine's Name-Swearing

Ferdinand, Sylvester, Florencia, and I went to the dormitory's common room to begin instructing our retainers. My retainers all gathered around me and awaited their next orders.

"Hartmut," I said, "please help prepare for the Grutrissheit transference ceremony in four days' time and serve as its High Priest. You will need to hurry back to Ehrenfest's temple to fetch your ceremonial robes, among other things. From tomorrow onward, I must also ask that you teach Prince Anastasius as much as you can about the ceremonies."

Hartmut accepted, radiating motivation. "I shall ensure the divine-avatar-led transference ceremony is performed to perfection."

I went on to ask that the adult guard knights who had participated in the Academy's ceremonies disguised as blue priests and shrine maidens make their own preparations as well.

"There is no reason we cannot serve as your guard during the ceremonies," Leonore declared. "But if you would permit me to ask, who is receiving the Grutrissheit?"

"Lady Eglantine," I replied. "In truth, I wished to assign Hartmut to her before she took over as the Sovereign High Bishop. She had other matters to prioritize, though, so Prince Anastasius is providing his support instead."

I was explaining the gist of our meeting when Ferdinand came over and gave Hartmut some notes. "These detail the ceremonies in full," he said. "If you must travel between Ehrenfest and the Sovereign temple on top of assisting Prince Anastasius, then leave the key we discussed with Rozemyne."

"Understood."

Hartmut removed the bible's key from his neck and put it around mine instead. He asked Ferdinand a few questions about the notes he had just received, then turned on his heel and started carrying out his orders.

"We, too, shall return to Ehrenfest. Judithe, Laurenz, Matthias

—the rest is up to you.”

“Understood!”

Cornelius, Leonore, Angelica, and Damuel followed Hartmut out of the common room. I watched them go, then summoned Gretia and Lieselea.

“Sorry to make you go back and forth like this, but I must ask you to retrieve my ceremonial robes and hair ornaments from Ahrensbach. I will use feystones for my shoes, so you need not worry about those.”

“As you wish, my lady.”

The pair departed for the villa; Rihyarda and the others were at the dormitory today, so there wouldn’t be a lack of attendants to look after me. Justus hurried out as well, having apparently received orders of some kind from Ferdinand.

“Philine, take this to Ehrenfest and ask the Rozemyne Workshop to start printing copies,” I said, handing her the manuscript we would distribute once the new Zent was crowned. “The aub has given his permission, but be sure to run it past Mother as well. Twenty-five copies should do. We intend to give them out during the Archduke Conference, so they need to be prioritized above all else. Mother and Muriella can split the work between themselves and even distribute some to Hasse’s monastery.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Roderick watched nervously as Philine left clutching the manuscript. “Lady Rozemyne, what about the Dunkelfelger story I’m writing?”

“Aub Dunkelfelger will not take the throne, so your time constraints have been removed. Do keep at it, though; he was so excited about your work that he mentioned buying up all the copies.”

Roderick had been pulling his hair out over his five-day deadline, so he was understandably relieved to have more time. I’d felt bad about making such an unreasonable request in the first place, but he was the only one capable of completing it.

“I shall take a short moment to embrace the calm and then get back to work,” he said.

“But your panic added such wonderful tension to your writing...” Judithe remarked, giggling. She had agreed to help Roderick by answering his questions about ditter, so she had seen his agony firsthand.

“Well, don’t let our help go to waste,” Laurenz added with a chuckle, having also witnessed the young scholar’s anguish. “Finish the job.”

Once I’d instructed all my retainers, Ferdinand came over and took the seat beside me. “Rozemyne, what do you intend to do about Letizia? If we follow Ahrensbach tradition, she will need to be demoted to an archnoble when you become the aub. She lacks parents, however, and would thus need to live in the orphanage. Your answer will decide whether she can attend the transference ceremony.”

“Could we return her to Drewanchel? I think she’d rather live with her parents than stay in Ahrensbach...”

“Perhaps, if you can find a way to nullify her contract; her adoptive parents both climbed the towering stairway. But that is assuming Drewanchel even wants her back—it might not welcome the return of an archduke candidate who caused problems elsewhere.”

“But she’s their daughter...” I said. Surely they wouldn’t refuse her.

“Yes, I doubted you would understand...” Ferdinand muttered, crossing his arms. “Letizia was baptized as an Ahrensbach archduke candidate. Even if her birth parents welcome her with open arms, the final decision rests with Aub Drewanchel. In light of recent events, I doubt any ruler would accept a member of Ahrensbach’s former archducal family. Maybe for the sake of securing a connection to you—but in that case, she would only be a source of trouble for us going forward.”

To my surprise, Ferdinand actually seemed to be worried about Letizia. “Do you believe it best for her to stay in my new duchy as an archduke candidate?” I asked. “If you would rather keep your distance from her, we can house her somewhere remote. Let me put your needs first.”

As much as I thought Letizia was cute, her actions had put Ferdinand on the brink of death. Coupled with the fact she had escaped the war physically unharmed, it made sense that she was lower on my list of priorities.

“First, there is something I wish to confirm...” Ferdinand said. “You intend to raise the children of those the Lanzenavians murdered in the orphanage, correct? I am including Alstede’s daughter.”

“Yes. Those children did no wrong.” Like in Ehrenfest, I planned to send the kids of assailants and victims alike to the orphanage. Then, when I took over as the aub, I would voluntarily serve as their guardian.

Ferdinand nodded carefully. “In that case, entrust Letizia to me.” I must have let my thoughts show on my face because he cocked an eyebrow at me and slowly added, “There is no need to look so concerned; I will not do anything to greatly displease you. Even if something *were* to happen, you would need only order me to stop.”

From there, Ferdinand stood up and started inspecting my health. He touched my neck, then frowned. “You have a slight fever. Have you built up too much mana?”

“Perhaps. I *did* get a tad emotional.”

“A tad?” A sardonic grin crossed his face before he instructed Brunhilde to prepare another sheet of silver cloth, which he then started wrapping around me.

“Ferdinand, what in the world are you doing?” I asked.

“You shall spend the coming days in your room. It would do you well to let out some of your mana. I also wish to see how much divine power is lost in the process.”

The silver cloth soon covered my eyes, plunging me into darkness. Someone picked me up, causing me to yelp, and Ferdinand instructed my name-sworn guard knights to accompany him.

“Lord Ferdinand, her name-sworn knights are all men!” Clarissa called. “Let me come with you!”

“But you’re a scholar, Clarissa!” Judithe cried out in turn.

“Scholars may come as long as they are name-sworn,” Ferdinand replied at length.

“Gahhh! But I’m a guard knight!” Judithe exclaimed. “How come I’m always being left out?! Maybe I should give my name too...”

I didn’t want her to make any hasty decisions. Ferdinand called on our name-sworn retainers only when he was going somewhere or doing something that had to be kept secret, and the pressure that was put on them couldn’t have been pleasant. I didn’t want Judithe to do anything that might make her bright smile fade away forever.

Though I couldn’t see, I could feel that I was being taken somewhere. It wasn’t long before my expert detection skills told me

we had arrived at the library—Schwartz and Weiss had just welcomed me. Ferdinand asked Solange to clear the building before taking me upstairs.

“We are here, Rozemyne,” he eventually said. “Can you stand?”

“Yes, I’ll manage.”

My body tilted, and my feet soon touched the floor. The silver cloth was removed to reveal that we were indeed in the library, standing before the statue of Mestionora. There was only one place to go from here.

“Ferdinand, don’t tell me...”

After ordering the knights to turn around, he handed me a sound-blocker and nodded. “I was going to dye the foundation myself, but the drastic change in your mana means I am now recognized as Aub Ahrensbach. The foundation refused me. Our only remaining option is for you to attempt it with your goddess-dyed mana. Its capacity is enormous enough for you to let out as much as you need to.”

In essence, we were killing two birds with one stone, dyeing the foundation enough that Erwaermen would stop complaining while also allowing me to release my excess mana.

“Is this why Hartmut gave me the bible’s key?” I asked.

“I was also apprehensive about him wearing it around Prince Anastasius. The upcoming ceremonies will paint you as a divine avatar of even higher status than the royals; who knows what dangers might follow?”

Ferdinand opened the cover of the book in Mestionora’s hands to reveal a keyhole, then encouraged me to channel mana into the foundation. “Release only as much as you need to,” he said. “If you go too far, Lady Eglantine might have a hard time dyeing over it.”

I slotted the key into Mestionora’s book, causing the statue to move aside without a sound. The descending staircase behind it led to an iridescent barrier, which led me to a room just like the one containing Ahrensbach’s foundation.

“This place is huge...” I mused aloud. “Guess that shouldn’t surprise me when I’m looking for the country’s foundation. Aaand, wow, it really is almost empty... No wonder Erwaermen is panicking.”

I spent a moment admiring the foundation, which was several times larger than those found in the duchies, then carefully started pouring my mana into it. Exercising caution was more important

than ever; I'd needed to use rejuvenation potions when dyeing Ahrensbach's foundation, and collapsing here would cause all sorts of problems.

By the time I'd released enough mana to feel comfortable, the foundation wasn't even one-sixth full. It was enough to bring the country back from the verge of collapse, if nothing else. I gazed upon the seven colored feystones swirling through the air and saw they were spinning faster now.

"Well, that should do it," I declared once my mana was slightly more than halfway depleted. I returned to the others and said, "Sorry for the wait, everyone."

No sooner had I locked Mestionora's book than the statue moved back to its original place. Ferdinand waited for it to settle, then instructed my name-sworn, who covered me in silver cloth once again and returned me to the dormitory.

Though I could spend the next four days at my leisure, I wouldn't be allowed to read in the library.

Relieved of my excess mana, I got some rest, practiced whirling, and participated in meetings about the upcoming ceremonies.

Ferdinand said my whirling was "sure to be sufficient"! Not bad, Rozemyne. Not bad at all!

The days seemed to pass in the blink of an eye, and it soon came time for the ceremonies. My female retainers inspected me in my ceremonial High Bishop robes and sighed in awe. I thought my appearance was the same as always—but then again, I couldn't see my divine power.

"Lady Rozemyne, please hold out your arms so we can put these on for you," Bertilde said, approaching with a box of charms and ornaments. I did as instructed and waited patiently as Lieseleta slowly adorned me.

"Never before have I seen charms with this many feystones..." I remarked.

Lieseleta nodded. "Lord Ferdinand made them specially so they would not obstruct your whirling." They reminded me of gloves, except they were woven out of tiny but slender chains that reached from the back of my hand to my upper arm. Rainbow feystones shaved down into beads glittered across them, each with a protective magic circle inside.

"Was he making them instead of sleeping?" I muttered, my lips

pursed. "He promised to get some rest, but these are too complex to have been made in three or four days..." As soon as the ceremonies were over, I would need to "encourage" him with one of Schlaftraum's blessings.

Clarissa giggled. "He simply wishes to be prepared. In his words, these precautions are necessary to prevent the goddess from returning to your body as you whirl. I would have loved to witness something so divine... but as you lose memories in the process, I shall make do without it."

It never even crossed my mind that my dedication whirl might summon Mestionora again...

I stroked the light chains covering my arms while thinking about my lost memories. Maybe these charms would protect my thoughts even if the goddess returned.

"Matthias, this is Leonore. Is our path secure?"

The ordonnanz shot out of the room, then returned with an "all clear" from Matthias. Today's plan was to leave through our tea party room and use the back paths meant for royals to reach a waiting room near the auditorium. To my knowledge, it was the same room the royals themselves had once used. Judithe, Laurenz, and Matthias had gone ahead to make sure the coast was clear.

"Lady Rozemyne, since you are ready..." Angelica, who was wearing the robes of a blue shrine maiden, covered me with silver cloth and picked me up for the umpteenth time.

"Hartmut put a lot of work into today's ceremonies," Clarissa announced, sticking out her chest. "He mobilized Prince Anastasius, the Sovereign nobles, and everyone in the Sovereign temple to make sure things were ready for you." She was trying to impress me, I gathered, but I was more worried about everyone forced to endure his enthusiasm.

We soon arrived at the waiting room, where Hartmut was ready to receive us. Eglantine and Anastasius appeared not long after. They inhaled sharply upon seeing me, then knelt to indicate my superior status. I'd seen the clothes they were wearing before.

"Lady Rozemyne," Eglantine said, "I was dressed in these same clothes when you blessed me at the start of my graduation ceremony. I hope to receive your blessing once again and earn the notice of the gods by wearing the divine color of my birth season."

I was admiring her outfit, feeling a little nostalgic, when Hartmut approached us. "Cornelius, leave Matthias and Laurenz

here and go to the auditorium. I want you and Lady Rozemyne's other guard knights to carry out the final checks."

The royals had said there weren't any issues, but maybe some of Raublut's co-conspirators remained in the Sovereign Knight's Order. At the very least, my knights were skeptical of anything the royal family told us. It probably didn't help that Ferdinand was going to such great lengths with my charms and other precautions.

Cornelius, who was clad in the robes of a blue priest, responded to Hartmut with a stern nod before heading to the auditorium with the others. Anastasius turned to his own knights and made the same request.

"Go to the auditorium and perform final checks of your own. Leave only as many knights as I need to protect me. The transference ceremony must be completed without incident."

Not once in Yurgenschmidt's long history had an Ehrenfest archduke candidate serving as Mestionora's divine avatar bestowed the Grutrissheit upon a new Zent. The nobles we'd invited were being kept in the dark, so many wanted to know why Trauerqual wasn't receiving the Grutrissheit and why it was being bestowed upon Eglantine when there were other people more deserving.

"Those directly involved with the transference, come to the back of the room," Hartmut said. The front portion was a waiting area for the royal retainers, whereas the back was for the royals themselves.

I moved to the back of the room with Hartmut, Eglantine, and Anastasius, who was serving as his wife's escort. Hartmut then addressed us again.

"Let us perform the name-swearing before the transference ceremony. Prince Anastasius and I shall observe."

"Right."

Hartmut and Anastasius watched as Eglantine produced a small white box, which she held up to me. For a moment, my eyes were drawn to her magnificent golden tresses, but I quickly corrected my focus. Inside the box was a multicolor feystone of every element—and inside that, Eglantine's name was written in golden letters.

I don't feel great about this, but oh well...

I'd said it before, and I would say it again: holding another person's life in your hands was absolutely terrifying.

Bonifatius's concerns about us corrupting the meaning of name-swearing arose in the back of my mind. Still, Ferdinand thought this

was necessary to ensure Eglantine wouldn't be hurt by my goddess-dyed mana during the ceremony and to guarantee her silence on various matters. It was also a good way to prevent her from one day trying to abuse her power and give Ferdinand more unreasonable commands; she was the kind of person who would do anything to protect Yurgenschmidt's peace.

I don't plan to give her any orders. I'm just playing it safe.

Anastasius glanced between us with an indescribable look on his face. He wanted to stop this but knew there was nothing he could do. I imagined he had said everything he could to dissuade Eglantine while she was making her name stone.

Probably because he doesn't want my mana surrounding his wife.

I bore the Mark of Ewigeliebe, so my mana would probably return to being like Ferdinand's when the ceremonies concluded and the divinity faded away. Anastasius would find that disgusting beyond words, but he would need to learn to deal with it.

Unless... Ewigeliebe-marked people in my situation don't end up having divine mana forever, do they?

That was a scary thought, but I tried not to dwell on it. Ferdinand had assured me that the divine mana would disappear eventually. I wanted to believe he was right.

"Um... May we begin, Lady Rozemyne?"

"Yes."

Eglantine met my eye, then took a deep breath and bowed her head. "I, Eglantine, swear to become a loyal vassal of Lady Rozemyne, the Divine Avatar of Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom, and to devote my life to Yurgenschmidt as its new Zent. As proof of my resolve, I give you my name and implore you to keep it with you at all times. In return, I ask that you grant me the Gruttrissheit and show me how to lead Yurgenschmidt to a better future."

Her delicate hands slowly held up the box containing her name stone. I accepted it and started filling it with my mana.

"Ngh..."

Eglantine clutched her chest and let out a small, pained groan, feeling the resistance. Anastasius cried out and moved to rush to her side, but Hartmut caught him by the hand.

"You must not interfere, Prince Anastasius. The ritual is not over until the stone has been completely enveloped. Based on Lady Rozemyne's past name-swearings, it seems the process is more

painful when there is a greater gap between the participants' mana capacities. Lady Eglantine is suffering the least of everyone who has given their name."

I slammed my mana into Eglantine's stone and ended the name-swearing then and there. She let out a pained sigh in response.

"Are you well, Lady Eglantine?" I asked.

"Yes, I am fine now," she replied with a smile like a blossoming flower. "I thank you ever so much for your consideration."

I put her name stone into the cage on my hip, then sat down and gestured for everyone else to join me. Third bell rang as we went over the procedure for the upcoming ceremony.

Blessings from the Gods

“Everyone has arrived,” Ferdinand announced as he entered the waiting room. He instructed us on what to do and then held out a hand to me, acting as my escort. “Take your places by the door.”

“If you will excuse me...” Hartmut said. He had agreed to perform the ceremony as the High Priest, so he entered the auditorium ahead of us, taking the door for professors that led directly to the stage. The rest of us would use the main entrance.

Hartmut’s departure left us with Eglantine and Anastasius, who would also enter ahead of us. Two of their guard knights stood in front of the doors, ready to open them whenever they received the signal. Ferdinand and I moved aside so that we wouldn’t be seen when our new Zent made her grand appearance.

“Now behold the Zent chosen by the Divine Avatar of Mestionora: Lady Eglantine.”

As the doors opened, Eglantine and Anastasius glanced over at me. I nodded at them in response. We had agreed that I would recreate the blessing from their graduation ceremony to make it seem like the gods were smiling down on them. Ferdinand grimaced at the reminder; he had said the Grutrissheit alone would suffice but ultimately conceded the point. Our exchange was fresh in my memory.

“We need the country’s nobles to fully accept Lady Eglantine as the new Zent. Otherwise, I won’t be able to focus on my library city.”

“That is your priority?”

“What else would it be?”

“Nothing, I suppose... If you would rather not get even more involved with the royal family, a single blessing will serve your purpose.”

It wasn’t the most impressive victory, but I’d secured permission nonetheless. I channeled mana into my ring as soon as the door to the auditorium closed.

Lady Eglantine, Prince Anastasius... The road ahead won’t be easy, but I wish you the best of luck! You have my support!

I made sure not to put much feeling into the blessing. It was

merely a gesture, like greeting an acquaintance. I nodded when I was done, satisfied with my work, only for Ferdinand to pinch his forehead and deeply furrow his brow.

“That was the worst-case scenario,” he said.

“Wait, what?”

“Are you truly that oblivious? The divine power swirling around you is intensifying.”

“Umm...”

I couldn’t see why Ferdinand was so troubled; a quick glance down at my hands revealed nothing out of the ordinary. Still, the situation must have been bad—he crossed his arms while looking from me to the auditorium to the ceiling. The crease in his brow deepened, and he started tapping his temples.

“What should we do?” I asked.

“The royal couple has already entered the auditorium, and the ceremony is underway. There is nothing we *can* do but proceed as normal.”

“Are you sure...? I mean, look.” I wasn’t aware of my extra divine power, but the feystones decorating my arms had started to shine—a clear indication that things were dire.

“We expected something strange to occur during the ceremony, but before...?” Ferdinand mused. “You really are impossible to predict.” He clucked, then searched through the rejuvenation potions and magic tools he had on hand. I noticed a number of rather violent-seeming implements hidden among them.

“You seem better equipped for a battle than a ceremony...” I observed.

“Anytime you are involved, I seldom know what to prepare for.”

“I can understand the rejuvenation potions—I’ve needed them for ceremonies in the past—but *explosives*?” I pursed my lips at him.

“It is better to be prepared than not,” Ferdinand scoffed. “Now, should you not be acting more like the avatar of a goddess? You are about to be summoned.”

I was partway through being lectured on the best ways to exude divinity when the doors to the auditorium opened again. Hartmut made his declaration from within.

“Now behold Lady Rozemyne, Divine Avatar of Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom.”

Well, here’s hoping I look the part.

Ferdinand and Hartmut were exceptionally thorough, so there was nothing to worry about—assuming we didn't make any major mistakes. I took a slow breath to steady my nerves, then placed my hand over Ferdinand's.

Oh, wow. I'm sparkling.

My divine power must have been swelling throughout his entire lecture. The feystones and charms covering my arms were making their presence known, shining so bright that they made my eyes sting. I raised my chin in an attempt to keep them out of sight, trying to avoid making eye contact with Ferdinand at the same time. He was looking straight ahead, but his polite smile chastised me for having unleashed an extraneous blessing in the first place.

I gave the blessing, sure, but this isn't my fault. It's all on the goddess.

According to Ferdinand, channeling mana into the foundation had reduced my divine power. Devoting a ton of mana while dedication whirling would most likely cause my shining to fade.

Stay strong, Rozemyne. Hold out just a little while longer.

"We shall provide more information during the upcoming Archduke Conference," Hartmut informed the auditorium. "On this momentous occasion, the long-absent Grutrissheit shall return."

I ascended the whirling stage with Ferdinand—and at once, the selection circle materialized underneath me.

Oh, come on! What now?!

Under normal circumstances, one had to whirl to make the circle appear. If the severity of my mana leak hadn't been obvious to me before, it certainly was now. No wonder Ferdinand grimaced and tapped a frustrated digit against his temple; this was so extreme that even I was taken aback.

On the bright side, I guess Ferdinand can leave out the part of his speech explaining that the magic circle will arise once we start whirling...

I waited patiently while Ferdinand gave his lecture on religious ceremonies and the magic circle. We had originally agreed that I would give the explanation, but now I was being made to keep silent so as not to lessen the divinity of my image. It was the right decision, but a mean one nonetheless.

His speech complete, Ferdinand spoke in a low voice that reached my ears and mine alone: "Unleash as much divine power as you can while you whirl." Then he descended the stage. The musicians beneath me strummed their instruments, which told me it

was time to start.

I knelt atop the stage. Ferdinand was now among the musicians, where he would play for the gods before using Verbergen's charms to ascend the altar with me. His decision to perform had seemed out of character for him, especially when I thought back to his insolence in the Garden of Beginnings, but he had quickly set me right. It was one thing to oppose Erwaermen, who no longer had the power of a god, but he couldn't risk disrespecting the actual gods responsible for his divine protections.

Oh, is the sound check over?

The musicians had stopped playing. They must have been ready. I took a slow breath, then began.

"I am one who offers prayer and gratitude to the gods who have created the world..."

To stop the audience from doubting my status as a divine avatar, I needed to put my all into my whirl. Eglantine would perform the same ceremony right after me.

If nothing else, my pillar of light needs to be bigger than hers!

I doubted my whirling was better than Eglantine's, but that was fine; I could compensate in other ways. I drew as much attention as I could to my status as a divine avatar, adding my natural mana to the goddess-dyed mana flowing through me. The pillar of light slowly grew as a result.

Perfect. Perfect! Just like that!



As I spun, I saw the statues of the gods move, opening a path. Eglantine was waiting before the altar and would step forth to whirl once the path was fully open, ensuring that nobody in the audience would notice if she couldn't erect high enough pillars. The knowledge that everything was going according to plan brought me some comfort, allowing me to focus on my dance. My luminous feystones obscured my view, so I didn't even notice the waves of mana radiating from the stage and ascending the altar or the fact that the statues had started to shine. I simply finished my whirl and then returned to kneeling.

"Praise be to the gods," I said.

In an instant, I was swallowed up by the most dazzling light. I squeezed my eyes shut on instinct and suddenly felt weightless. Then a voice reached my ears.

"So you have returned. You came second, Myne."

Um, what?

I sheepishly opened my eyes and gazed upward. We had planned for me to bring Eglantine and the unseen Ferdinand to the Garden of Beginnings once the whirling was complete, but here I was, facing Erwaermen alone.

Hold on... We didn't account for this.

The blood drained from my face. I frantically looked around, searching for an exit, but I couldn't find one anywhere. Even the entrance behind the statues was shut for some reason.

Um, is Lady Eglantine going to be okay?! Can she reopen it on her own?! Ferdinand, what's the plan?!

As far as I was aware, he hadn't expected me to teleport to the Garden of Beginnings immediately after finishing my dedication whirl.

"Are you listening, Myne?" Erwaermen asked.

"No, sorry. This happened so suddenly that I was lost in thought. Could you repeat yourself?"

"I said you came in second in the race."

Second...?

"Do you mean... Gervasio got here before me?!" I exclaimed, my eyes wide with terror. Ferdinand must have made a mistake. Maybe he'd destroyed the wrong medal, allowing Gervasio to escape the country gate.

Erwaermen shook his head. “Would that were the case, but no. Terza has disappeared. I do not know where he is.” Maybe he wasn’t able to track Gervasio now that the man’s medal was destroyed. Or maybe Gervasio had gone somewhere else.

“Does that mean Ferdinand came first, then?”

“Yes. The coward who attacked Terza to obstruct him returned to me before you.”

Wait, Ferdinand attacked Gervasio? This is the first I’ve heard about that.

He must have traveled all over while I was holed up in the Ehrenfest Dormitory. I didn’t know which route he had taken to reach Erwaermen, but it didn’t really matter; time hadn’t been of the essence.

“Look,” Erwaermen said. His eyes were still closed, but he indicated a direction with a subtle turn of his head. “Upon his return, Quinta declared his victory and then withdrew without asking for the path to the foundation. He even left something behind. Surely he does not consider this garden a storage room of some kind.”

I turned to see something wrapped in silver cloth and tied with magic rope, the former to prevent mana from seeping out and the latter to keep anyone from touching it. I recognized it almost immediately.

That’s the magic tool Grutrisheit we were going to give Lady Eglantine!

I’d pleaded with Ferdinand to let me see under the cloth, but he’d refused; my goddess-dyed mana would have overwhelmed the tool and forced him to remake it from scratch. He had taken it here to the Garden of Beginnings and used the opportunity to announce his victory.

Well, that shouldn’t surprise me.

“You came here later than the insolent Quinta, but you were first to reach the foundation,” Erwaermen explained. “Its mana has increased, though it has yet to be dyed completely. My congratulations on defeating the coward.”

Ferdinand wanted me to supply the foundation before him. But thanks.

I wasn’t going to correct Erwaermen—far be it from me to turn down his praise—but my victory against Ferdinand wasn’t at all deserved. I’d only supplied the foundation as a means of releasing

my excess mana and so Ferdinand could see whether it changed the divine power within me.

“Moreover, the country gates are almost entirely dyed with your mana. I acknowledge your triumphs and shall make *you* the new Zent, not Quinta.”

“Um...”

This was getting a little out of hand. I didn’t want to become the Zent out of nowhere. The role didn’t appeal to me, and I was already in the process of granting Eglantine the Grutrissheit as the Divine Avatar of Mestionora. Not to mention, Ferdinand would be furious if my actions undid all of his hard work.

“Myne. Finish supplying the foundation before Quinta.”

“It seems wrong to make me the Zent. Ferdinand won the race, didn’t he? And there are plans in place to make me Aub Ahrensbach.”

Erwaermen’s decision undermined the whole point of our race, but he was unperturbed. “You filled the foundation with mana.”

“Yes, but only because—”

“And most of all, I dislike that insolent man. I would rather anyone else become the Zent.”

So it was a matter of personal preference. I doubted there was much I could say to change Erwaermen’s mind, especially when he had so many reasons to hate Ferdinand.

“I understand,” I said. “Ferdinand was anything but courteous with you. But he also won the race, so I would argue we should do as he says.” Passing him over would mean casting aside the reason we’d competed in the first place. Besides, honoring the results would guarantee Ferdinand the throne; Erwaermen would still get his way in the end.

“Quinta must dye the foundation before he can be freed. Such was our agreement. He has yet to finish, so act quickly. Dye the foundation before Quinta steals it from you.”

Could you maybe not speak like it’s already set in stone?

Fully dyeing the foundation in my current state would make it so much harder for Eglantine to dye it as the new Zent. Not to mention, I wanted to save my mana for Ahrensbach’s Spring Prayer and entwickeln. We were all working so hard to put Eglantine on the throne, so I refused to budge no matter how strongly the former god felt.

I desperately searched for the right words to convince

Erwaermen. Did they even exist? How was I to convince someone whose actions were founded in the realm of the gods?

“Your mana alone will not be enough,” he continued, more or less ignoring me. “Mestionora shall provide her aid and grant you yet more of her inexhaustible power. She will make use of your body until the foundation is dyed.”

Light rained down on me before I could even respond. The feystones covering my body began to spark as if resisting Mestionora’s descent.

“Eep?!”

My charms from Ferdinand activated on their own, and it was then that I realized the gravity of the situation. Rather than seeking my consent, Mestionora was outright attempting to *steal* my body. Goose bumps rose all over my arms.

Am I about to lose even more of my memories?!

“No! I won’t give up my body!” I cried, resisting the presence trying to enter me. I crossed both arms in front of my chest and channeled mana into my feystones.

I refused to give up more of my memories. Some things were too important for compromise. I’d also promised Ferdinand that I wouldn’t carelessly surrender my body again. He still refused to tell me what Mestionora had done the last time she’d taken control of me, and the thought of what the goddess might do if she descended again turned my stomach.

I don’t want to worry or hurt him!

I focused on rejecting the presence until the light ceased raining down on me. Erwaermen began to radiate an overwhelming amount of power in response.

“You would take up arms against us?”

“I’m not trying to fight you! It’s just... when Mestionora used my body before, it cost me so many of my most precious memories. Even now, they haven’t returned. I don’t want to lose anything else that matters to me.” I wouldn’t have minded dyeing the foundation temporarily—despite the problems Eglantine and Ahrensbach would face—but I absolutely refused to lend my body to the goddess.

“Your only concern is your memories? Then I shall call upon the aid of the other gods.”

“Hm? How can they—?”

“Thou hast my blessings,” Erwaermen said, waving a hand.

“Receive this power to supply the foundation.” Light beams of various colors descended on me all at once, and the divine power of their elements coursed through me, clashing with Mestionora’s influence.

“Eek!”

Goose bumps spread from my arms to the rest of my body. This clash of mana made my stomach churn; it felt like tendrils too slender to be seen were wriggling their way into the pores of my skin. It was unlike any blessing I’d ever received—rather than working together, the gods’ divine power fought for dominance inside of me.

I was racked with pain as the mana inside me continued to rebound. Parts of me felt hundreds of small twinges like they had electricity coursing through them. Other parts were throbbing and numb. So intense was the agony in some areas that I genuinely wondered if my bones had snapped. My head, neck, back, stomach, arms, legs—everything hurt, and it was all I could do to stop from crying out.

“Now go forth and dye the foundation,” Erwaermen said. “Myne?”

The pain was too much. I crumpled to the ground and screamed, “I-It hurts! I can’t! AAAGGGHHH!”

I couldn’t even sit. Mestionora had dyed my mana while I was unconscious, inadvertently sparing me the torment, but now several gods were fighting for control. They all pushed against each other in their battle to establish dominance. Unlike the Devouring heat, I couldn’t control this foreign mana; I could only curl up and scream as my body was torn apart from the inside.

“Hmm... The gods did not expect this...” Erwaermen muttered, looking up at the sky. “They seem to be in quite a panic. Mestionora wishes to descend and restore order to the divine power of the gods inside you. Can you remove those ornaments from your arms?”

“NGHHH! AAAGGGH!”

I desperately shook my head. Even sitting was beyond me; how could anyone expect me to roll up my sleeves and start messing around with intricate charms?

Erwaermen crouched down and reached out to me, but I was too far away. Even in his human form, he wasn’t able to move from his spot.

Then what’s the point of transforming in the first place?! How stupid

can you be?!

“Hmm... This is troubling.”

Though tears blurred my vision, I saw Erwaermen stand up again. I couldn't tell whether he really was concerned—his voice betrayed not a trace of emotion—but he was definitely looking for something.

“Someone is trying to open a path here,” he said. “There are some mana concerns, but inviting them seems worthwhile if they can remove your ornaments.”

I nodded as much as I could. No doubt he was referring to Eglantine. Unless someone intervened, the divine powers swelling and rebounding in my body would surely kill me.

Erwaermen slashed the air, creating an entrance that stood out like a sore thumb in the perfectly white Garden of Beginnings. No sooner had its iridescent barrier wavered than small explosions popped all around the former god.

Oh. It's Ferdinand.

Nobody else would use charms from the God of Concealment to sneak into this place and start attacking—not that his bombardment appeared to be doing much. Erwaermen looked slightly annoyed, but that was all.

“It was not your mana that opened the path, Quinta. I assume you employed another of your craven tricks. So be it. Come here and remove Myne's arm ornaments.”

“For what purpose?” Ferdinand asked, still unseen.

“To allow Mestionora to descend.”

“I refuse.”

Wait! No!

Ferdinand appeared out of nowhere, having likely removed his concealment charms. I could tell that he was still in battle mode; he had several magic tools in hand and appeared to be gauging the distance between him and Erwaermen.

This was bad. Refusing the goddess meant refusing my only hope of surviving. I reached a trembling hand toward Ferdinand, terrified of my approaching demise, but he was too busy staring at Erwaermen to notice.

Ferdinand... Help...

“I see,” Erwaermen said. “Myne's death will complete your Book of Mestionora and allow you to claim the foundation. A most adequate plan—and one that leaves you without any blood on your

hands. I would expect no less from you.”

The former god paused in thought. “Hmm... Loath though I am to admit it, I must acknowledge you as the next Zent. Myne, it is unfortunate, but there was not enough time to support your ascension to the throne.” He shook his head in disappointment, but his resignation was clear. “Quinta, it seems unnecessarily cruel to leave Myne in her current state. Show some compassion and put her to rest, then hurry up and dye the foundation.”

Ferdinand inspected us both, concerned. He must have then noticed my desperation because he knelt down beside me, keeping a cautious eye on Erwaermen all the while.

“Would allowing Mestionora to descend save Rozemyne?”

“Only the gods can control divine power. There is nothing mere mortals can do for her.”

Ferdinand ground his teeth. “Rozemyne, do you oppose Mestionora descending into your body?”

“No...! Save... me. AAAGH!”

Ferdinand put away his magic tools and pulled out what appeared to be a small sweet. He wrenched open my clenched jaw, stuck it in my mouth, and then popped one in his own mouth before rising to his feet. He moved to stand between Erwaermen and me, then struck the former god with an attack. I couldn’t see it through his cape, but there was another explosive pop.

“This is a less potent version,” Ferdinand said. “Stay frozen while I rescue Rozemyne.”

“Aah...! Ngh...!”

Erwaermen groaned in pain, though I couldn’t understand why. He’d weathered all the other attacks like they were nothing. I received my answer when I saw Ferdinand toss aside a silver tube. He must have hit Erwaermen with instant-death poison.

So that thing he fed me was the antidote? It tasted pretty bitter.

Only once Erwaermen was dealt with did Ferdinand roll up my sleeves and start removing my defensive charms.

“It hurts... Gaaah!”

“I understand, but you must stay still.”

That was easier said than done; the pain was intense enough that even the slightest movement brought about a fresh wave of agony. He’d never had trouble ignoring my writhing and complaining before. Couldn’t he continue that trend and get this over with already?

“Um, Lord Ferdinand, Lady Rozemyne... Was this really worth interrupting the transference ceremony?” Eglantine called. Her worried question reminded me that she had opened the path in the first place. *She* was supposed to have come here, not Ferdinand.

“I am removing some of Rozemyne’s charms so that Mestionora may descend into her body. Do not just stand there; help me. You would do well to realize that you, too, will climb the towering stairway if something happens to her.”

Eglantine came over at once, responding to the urgency of the request. She paled as soon as she saw me.

“Lord Ferdinand, what in the world happened to Lady Rozemyne?”

“I do not know,” he replied, frustrated. “But she will die unless Mestionora descends into her body.” It was then that he finished removing the charms from my first arm.

“Could you keep her arm in place? I cannot find the clasp.”



Ferdinand pinned my arm down while Eglantine quickly rolled up my sleeve. The moment the final charm was removed, Mestionora's voice echoed through my mind.

"I shall dismiss you for a short while. But this time, I will not grant you access to my library."

And with that, my consciousness was plucked away. The world around me faded into a blank white void.

I'm banned from the Goddess of Wisdom's library?! NOOOOOO!

Gone was my only reason for looking forward to the afterlife. The despair had just set in when Mestionora's voice reappeared in my head.

"I am finished. Now go."

"Um, did something happen? Did you do something to my body?" I asked. Ferdinand would probably keep me in the dark again, so this was my best chance to find out.

"The last time I descended into your vessel, I dyed you completely. You would not have felt so much pain if you had waited for my influence to fade, but alas. That contributed to how the gods' power reacted inside you."

"Was there another reason?" I asked.

"Quinta's magic tools blocked my descent, no? The gods answered Erwaermen's call for aid and channeled their mana into you with enough force to overwhelm your charms."

W-Was that really necessary?

The charms were designed to block the descent of a certain goddess, not to stop the gods' blessings, so the rush of divine power meant to overcome them hadn't faced any resistance whatsoever. The gods' power had slammed straight into me, racking me with more pain than any human could endure.

"The gods were not acting with malice, but they did wish to spite Quinta for lashing out at Erwaermen."

So they'd put me through hell to get back at Ferdinand. I couldn't say I was impressed.

"I regret that you were wrapped up in all this. Still, I shall say no more. Return before Quinta starts to rampage in his impatience."

She was making him out as some kind of angry beast, which simply wasn't true. Sure, he was calculated and ready to do anything—however immoral—to accomplish his goals, but for the

most part, he was really quite even-tempered.

“I wouldn’t say he’s impatient...”

“No? He acts under Ewigeliebe’s influence, and any discipline he might have vanishes when it comes to his Geduldh. From now on, I would rather you both stay far, far away from Erwaermen.”

Mestionora sounded genuinely concerned for the former god. Plenty of stories claimed she was devoted to him—he had saved her life, apparently—and it seemed that they were true. I could understand why she wouldn’t want Ferdinand near him when he had charged into the Garden of Beginnings with explosives in hand.

If one looks only at the things he’s done there, then yeah—the angry beast comparison makes sense.

“Understood. Upon my return, I will take Ferdinand and leave the Garden of Beginnings.”

“Good. And make haste in dyeing Yurgenschmidt’s foundation. That is Erwaermen’s wish and why the gods lent you their power to begin with.”

Though my exchange with Erwaermen had spiraled out of control, it was true that the gods wanted Yurgenschmidt to survive. I wasn’t opposed to granting their wishes; their divine power would prove essential to our cause, and they had given me various blessings in the past.

“I thank you for your assistance, O Goddess of Wisdom. Praise be to the gods!”

The Blessings' Influence

I returned to my body to find Ferdinand right in front of me, his face unusually close to mine. He wore the same expression as the last time Mestionora had returned to the realm of the gods.

"You *are* Rozemyne, correct?" he asked. "How do you feel? The goddess descended, but I am unsure what she did. The divine power that surrounded you remains. Are you truly well? Have you lost anything else that you hold dear?"

Ferdinand was suspicious. He had noticed the divine power of several gods within me, but Mestionora's descent hadn't seemed to change anything.

I moved my hands a little. Though my fingertips still tingled and my shoulders felt uncomfortable, I was no longer in agony. "I don't feel completely better, but the pain is a lot more bearable."

"Good. I was told you were overcome by the divine power of other gods. As time passes and your mana recovers, their power will increase as well, so expend it as soon as you can."

"Do I just need to use it?" I asked. That didn't seem too hard; I'd promised to dye the country's foundation, and Ahrensbach's Spring Prayer was right around the corner.

"Yes, but be warned that it will return as your mana does—to a lesser extent each time, at least. According to the goddess... the pain will endure until the gods' influence has completely faded."

"Just a moment. How long will that take? I don't want to spend entire months in agony. Is there anything I can do to speed up the process?"

"It would seem so..." Ferdinand replied, averting his eyes as he helped me to my feet.

"Goodness, Lord Ferdinand..." Eglantine shook her head. "Your phrasing will only concern Lady Rozemyne further. You must reveal everything the goddess told you."

I stared up at Ferdinand, in full agreement. It wasn't good to keep secrets from someone so prone to causing trouble. He grimaced in response and eventually conceded.

"Mortal mana stands no chance when one is overwhelmed with divine mana, as you were before Mestionora's return. But it *can* regain control when one is drained to the point of being almost completely empty."

"So we just need you to dye me when I'm nearly out of mana?" I asked, surprised that we had such an easy solution. "That sounds doable—though I will need to spend all of my mana soon."

Eglantine smiled, though her slightly lowered eyebrows betrayed some concern. "It will mean putting winter before autumn, Lady Rozemyne, but that is nothing compared to your life. You have no choice, and yet..."

"Oh, do you mean summoning winter early in Ahrensbach? Ewigeliebe's sword *would* drain almost all of my mana, but it seems a little wasteful, don't you think?" Not to mention, channeling so much divinely charged mana into the sword when spring was almost over would result in too great a change. It would seem like the seasons had moved in reverse, which was a spooky thought.

"No, Rozemyne," Ferdinand interjected with a heavy sigh. "That is not what she means." He shot Eglantine a look as if urging her not to reveal so much, then said, "I will explain the matter to Rozemyne later. Lady Eglantine, have you registered your mana to the Grutrisheit?"

"Yes, I am done."

Eglantine showed us a bracelet with a rather large feystone. That must have been her magic tool Grutrisheit; it took the form of an ornament so the wielder could make it seem like they were producing it with their schtappe. Zent Albsenti really had produced a technical marvel when she'd created the first iteration for her beloved son; even Ferdinand considered it an impressive achievement. A mother's love truly was profound.

"That is a single-generation Grutrisheit," I said. "You are the only one who can use it, Lady Eglantine."

"I am aware," she replied, then knelt before Ferdinand and me. "I am more grateful than I can put into words that I—and, by extension, the royal family—have been graced with the Grutrisheit."

"Myne has returned," Erwaermen said with a frown, then started waving us away. "Leave, all of you." An entrance appeared, and he slowly started morphing back into a giant white tree. Given the circumstances—he had striven to save Yurgenschmidt and

called upon the gods to provide their aid, only to be brutally attacked—one could say he was a pretty tragic figure.

“Erwaermen,” I said, “I promised Mestionora that I would dye the foundation, and that is what I shall do. You may rest easy.”

I was sure I saw him nod in response before he turned fully into a tree.

“Rozemyne, dyeing the foundation would—”

I shook my head, cutting Ferdinand short. “It must be done; that is why the gods gave me their power. And as it is too much for a mortal to bear, it makes sense that I should use it. Even as we speak, the divine power that the goddess put in order for me is starting to swell.”

It wouldn’t be long before the pain returned in full force. Collapsing in front of the country’s nobles and screaming in agony wouldn’t be wise—not while I was being treated as the avatar of a goddess.

“We have less time than I expected,” Ferdinand said. “Let us finish the ceremony at once. I will arrange for the dyeing of the foundation.” He started collecting what appeared to be ivory branches strewn across the ground.

“What are those?” I asked.

“Branches of the white tree, I would imagine. They appeared after I cut Erwaermen’s hair.”

“Wait, what?! You cut his hair?! No wonder Mestionora deemed you an enemy!” Worse still, he must have done it while she was inhabiting my body. Comparing him to a beast made a lot more sense.

“If you would rather I put them back, I shall, but they are most valuable materials. Would you not like to find out what kinds of fey paper we could make with them?”

“Now that you mention it, one *should* maximize the value of any resource found scattered across the ground.”

Ferdinand grinned, and the divine power within me began to stir.

I’ll make sure he never returns to the Garden of Beginnings, so please! Overlook him just this once, O gods!

Ferdinand reactivated Verbergen’s charm and went on ahead. I took Eglantine’s hand and followed, moving slowly due to the pain and discomfort that remained.

“It feels like the ceremony is already over...” I said.

“Truly. Too much has happened in this short time,” Eglantine replied quietly as we descended the altar. “I am awestruck that Lord Ferdinand managed it all on his own.”

Eglantine went on to explain everything I’d missed. My disappearance had apparently made her turn white as a sheet, but she had still managed to activate the selection circle using feystones, exactly as Ferdinand predicted. She had climbed the altar and arrived at the Garden of Beginnings, whereupon she had found me in agony. My charms had then been removed, and the goddess had descended—only to immediately start arguing with Ferdinand.

“Ferdinand and the goddess fought?” I asked.

“Indeed. He was displeased with her for what she did to you, and she was displeased with him for what he did to Erwaermen. In short, she cares for Erwaermen as much as Lord Ferdinand cares for you.”

“Erwaermen *did* save Mestionora’s life, according to the myths, so maybe she sees him as I see Ferdinand—more important than reading books in a library.”

Eglantine gave me a troubled look. “No wonder Lord Ferdinand hesitates to hasten the arrival of winter.”

I cocked my head at her. Something wasn’t adding up. It seemed safe to say that my understanding of the “arrival of winter” wasn’t the correct one.

Guess I’ll just have to ask Ferdinand.

“Lady Eglantine,” I said, “please do not tell anyone what you saw or heard in the Garden of Beginnings. I would rather not order you, but I do not have a choice in the matter.”

“I understand. And worry not—there is nobody with whom I could share this information in the first place. Now, let us finish this ceremony.”

The divine power inside me continued to swell, causing my hands to tremble. Eglantine gave the one she was holding a reassuring squeeze, then donned the bright smile she wore while socializing. I nodded and smiled as well, doing my best to come across as the avatar of a goddess.

As I descended the altar, an intoxicated mutter from Hartmut reached my ear: “The divinity hurts to behold...” Ferdinand must have brought him up to speed.

“May the new Zent form a vow with the Goddess of Light,” our acting High Priest declared. “Lady Rozemyne, might I assist you?”

He stood beside me and held a voice amplifier to my mouth in preparation for my response.

I nodded, then turned to Eglantine. “O Zent, blessed by the gods, declare your loyalty to the Goddess of Light, ruler of contracts. *Beleuchkrone*.”

My schtappe turned into the Goddess of Light’s crown, which I placed atop the head of the now kneeling Eglantine. Getting it to sit right was surprisingly tough; I worried it might go askew or fall off the moment she stood. I really wasn’t cut out for being an attendant, though that news came as no surprise to me.

As soon as I was done, I took a step back, prompting Hartmut to pass the voice-amplifying tool to the new Zent.

“I, Eglantine, hereby swear to the Goddess of Light and the twelve subordinates who serve by her side to correct the distortions that have taken root in Yurgenschmidt, to revive old rituals as the Sovereign temple’s High Bishop, and to keep my promises to Lady Rozemyne, the Divine Avatar of Mestionora.”

The crown let out a truly dazzling flash, eliciting a response from a portion of the divine power within me. Some of the Light subordinates must have contributed to the spectacle.

As I am now, is it really safe to give an omni-elemental blessing?

A wave of unease spread through me, causing my divine mana to rise. My hands shook more violently than before. To really sell the idea that Eglantine had received the true Grutrissheit, I needed to give her an omni-elemental blessing. I couldn’t think of any other way to make the transference seem divine.

I caught Hartmut’s eye as he retrieved the magic tool. There was no time to discuss the matter with him or Eglantine. He must have noticed something then because he blinked at me and recoiled ever so slightly. His gaze wandered in search of the currently invisible Ferdinand.

No! We can’t stop the ceremony now!

“In the Garden of Beginnings, the gods recognized Lady Eglantine as the new Zent,” I declared, forging ahead to keep Hartmut from interfering. “Now that she is oath-bound to the Goddess of Light, I shall bestow the Grutrissheit upon her.”

I cast stylo and immediately started to pray. “O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies...” The sigils of the primary gods began to shine, and my divine power surged with each new word. My temperature rose so suddenly that, by the time the blessing

rained down on Eglantine, I almost expected to burst into flames.

“Lady Eglantine, let all witness the Grutrissheit and see that you are the Zent,” I said.

I retreated a step so that Eglantine could take center stage. Hartmut was right behind me, and at once, he asked me whether I was well. I didn’t even have a chance to reply before Ferdinand emerged from the shadows.

“The arrangements for your trip to the foundation have been made,” he said. “You are coming down with a fever; I can see it on your face.”

“The divine power in me responded to the prayer,” I muttered.

“Then the goddess was correct—you must head to the foundation. Everyone else, stay here; we must keep its location a secret. I trust you can buy us enough time, Hartmut.”

Hartmut was lost for words. As expected, considering the preposterous task just thrust upon him. The cheers as Eglantine held aloft the Grutrissheit gave him no chance to protest.

“From here, have King—rather, *Lord*—Trauerqual deliver the speech we planned to give directly to the aubs,” Ferdinand said. “If not even that gives us enough time, move on to the information we planned to share during the Archduke Conference.”

“Understood...” Hartmut replied at length.

The applause died down while Ferdinand sped through his remaining instructions. Our audience genuinely believed that Eglantine held the true Grutrissheit. My duty as an avatar was almost complete.

So close. Just need to reach the exit without passing out...

“Now, everyone,” Hartmut said, tense from the weight suddenly dropped on his shoulders. “Let us give our prayers to the gods!”

I was about to depart, so a final prayer was unavoidable. Some light escaped my ring and made my fever even worse. I was struck with the urge to put my head in my hands and groan.

Nooo... Why am I like this?!

“Lady Rozemyne and Lady Eglantine shall now depart,” Hartmut announced. “Raise your schtappes high for them!” He then rushed to inform the others of our sudden change of plan for the ceremony.

Anastasius approached the altar to escort Eglantine. He nearly choked in surprise when Ferdinand appeared seemingly out of thin air.

"You proceeded with the blessing despite the stakes?" my escort asked me under his breath. "You truly are a fool."

"Right back at you," I said. "The stakes have been high for weeks now. No need to state the obvious."

Even as we insulted each other, we kept polite smiles plastered across our faces. My legs felt like jelly as we hurried out of the auditorium, and my hands continued to tremble as I clung to Ferdinand's arm.

No sooner had the door closed behind us than Ferdinand returned to his usual expression. "Let us act quickly. There is only so much time Hartmut and the others can buy us." He glared in my direction, his eyes focused on the divine power swirling around me. "Are you well, Rozemyne?"

"Not really. Call it improper or image-shattering or what have you, but I want nothing more than to flop down onto the floor." I was queasy to the point of wanting to throw up... but what I really wanted to vomit out was all the divine power inside me.

"Over here, Lady Rozemyne," Gretia and Clarissa said. They had been waiting outside the auditorium and immediately covered me with a silver cloak. I could guess from the sudden looks of relief on everyone's faces that the divine power radiating from me was especially intense.

"Gretia, Clarissa..." I said. "Why are you here?"

"Partway through the ceremony, Lord Ferdinand instructed us to prepare some silver cloth and wait here for you," Clarissa explained while adjusting the neck of the cloak.

Gretia, who was pulling the hood over my head, looked at her fellow retainer with thorough exasperation. "Yet you still found it necessary to return to the auditorium and watch Lady Rozemyne's performance."

"Do forgive me, but I made it back here before Lady Rozemyne arrived."

For all their bantering, they both looked openly concerned.

"Eckhart, Matthias, and Laurenz shall accompany us as guard knights," Ferdinand noted. "Those who cannot approach Rozemyne in her current state must stay behind, no matter their role. This matter concerns national secrets, so only those who have given their names to Lady Rozemyne, Lady Eglantine, or me are permitted to come with us." It was an ultimatum meant to silence Eglantine's retainers—they could either give their names or wait patiently.

From there, Ferdinand rounded on Anastasius. "Of course, this applies to you as well."

"Excuse me?!"

"You are neither the Zent nor bound to her. Our destination is no place for you."

Anastasius must not have appreciated being told to wait with my blue-robed retainers; his outrage was beyond the point of no return. Ferdinand paid him no mind as he pulled me up into a sideways carry. Not having to stand did wonders for my fever.

"In that case, Ferdinand, the same should—"

"Anastasius," Eglantine said, patting his arm in warning, "I am sure you can guess where we are headed. And can you not see that Lady Rozemyne is especially unwell? We do not have time to speak right now. Consider what will happen if the worst befalls her."

Anastasius looked between Ferdinand and me. He was still vexed, but he seemed to understand. "You need me to help buy time, correct?"

Ferdinand shook his head. "As soon as we are done, Lady Eglantine, acting as the new Zent, must collect the criminal imprisoned in one of the country gates. You and the knights staying behind should prepare for this mission."

Anastasius and the knights nodded, then turned on their heels and got straight to work. Only the name-sworn remained.

Eglantine looked around, then up at Ferdinand. "Let us hurry. I can sense Lady Rozemyne's divine power getting stronger."

"Rozemyne, can you order those who accompany us not to speak of the events to come?"

"Do not... inform others... of the events to come," I ordered.

Ferdinand nodded and strode forward. I swayed in his arm, causing the heat in my body to rampage. I clung to him, hoping it would steady me somewhat, but it stopped working entirely when he picked up the pace.

Eglantine was almost left behind on our march to the library. Ferdinand was moving too fast for her to keep up.

"Professor Solange, the situation is as I described in my ordonnanz," he said upon our arrival. "Please wait in your office. I must ask that you let nobody else in the library until we are done."

"But of course. I know how to face the arrival of spring. The rest is up to you." She moved aside to let us pass. "Lady Eglantine, I celebrate the birth of a new Zent from the bottom of my heart. May

your reign be long and prosperous.”

“I shall depend upon your guidance, Professor Solange.”

One could hardly dismiss the library after learning how deeply it was connected to the rise of new Zents. Eglantine promised to speak with Solange again soon, then followed after Ferdinand and me.

“Roderick, contact Hartmut and permit him to end the ceremony. Justus, Eckhart, stay on guard for anyone approaching the library. All other knights, face away and protect this area.”

“Understood!”

After directing the knights who had accompanied us, Ferdinand instructed Gretia and Clarissa to remove my silver cloak and take the key hanging from my neck.

“If you will excuse me, Lady Rozemyne...” Gretia said.

I could only nod in response as my retainer pulled down my hood and retrieved the key. With some help from Clarissa, she soon managed to remove it from its chain.

“Pass the key to Lady Eglantine and turn your backs as well,” Ferdinand said. He waited for them to finish, then gave the new Zent a brief summary of how to use the key. She opened the cover of the statue’s Grutrissheit and revealed the stairway to the foundation.

“Goodness...” Eglantine said, her eyes wide.

Ferdinand sent her ahead, then carried me downstairs. We passed through the iridescent barrier to reach Yurgenschmidt’s foundation.

At last, Ferdinand set me down. I clapped my hands on the foundation and wasted no time channeling my mana into it. The divine power flowed out as well, causing my breathing to get easier, the pain racking my body to fade, and the heat rampaging through me to cool.

Aaah! Back from the brink of death!

“The key to the Sovereign temple’s bible also unlocks Yurgenschmidt’s foundation,” Ferdinand explained to Eglantine. “In the same sense, the keys in the possession of the duchies’ High Bishops open the paths to their respective foundations. It dates back to when Zents and aubs served as High Bishops and should make it clear to you why the royal family and archducal families must return to serving their temples. You may read your Grutrissheit if you wish to know more.”

He continued, "As per Erwaermen's and Mestionora's wishes, we shall first dye the foundation with Rozemyne's mana. That should satisfy the gods, who so strongly wish to resolve the mana shortage and prevent the country's destruction. History has proven that once the foundation is filled, dyeing it will prove simple. I know not whether the presence of divine power will complicate the matter, but we are only in this situation because of the royal family's ignorance. Lord Anastasius and you have no choice but to press on."

"So it shall be done."

Because this was the only time they had to speak, Ferdinand explained everything that would need to be done for Yurgenschmidt's future. Eglantine desperately tried to memorize it all.

"Redraw the borders and establish the new duchies before the Archduke Conference," he said. "Otherwise, Lords Trauerqual and Sigiswald will not be able to become aubs. Consider that your most urgent duty. If you can first retrieve the divine instruments from the former duchies, it will spare you the burden of needing to create the instruments anew."

I'm glad to have all that divine power out of my system, but...

Back when I'd dyed Ahrensbach's foundation, I'd needed to swig a rejuvenation potion halfway through. Yurgenschmidt's foundation was so much larger... so why wasn't I even close to running out of mana?

"Um, Ferdinand, we have a problem..." I said. "I'm pouring as much of my mana into the foundation as I can, but it doesn't seem to be going down. Is this going to be enough to drain me? If not, what should we do next?"

I noted that it felt like a more extreme version of when I'd performed the divine protections ritual and lost control of my mana, which made Ferdinand fall into thought. "Not even filling the country's foundation is enough?" he mused. "Hmm... You sound much better than before. How fares your health?"

"Fine, actually. I was able to channel out the divine power, which lowered my fever. I just worry about what might happen if we can't find another outlet for my mana."

"I see. In that case, I would advise you to join Lady Eglantine when she redraws the borders. You cannot be involved in the creation of the new duchies' foundations and temples, as Lady

Eglantine needs to discuss those matters with the aubs and reinforce her authority as the Zent, but the new borders are more or less set in stone. It should all go smoothly enough.”

Eglantine nodded. “I would very much appreciate your assistance. That said, there has been a slight amendment to what we agreed upon. After reviewing the situation with Aub Drewanchel and Lady Adolphine, we have decided that a portion of the land we set aside for Lord Sigiswald will instead be given to Drewanchel.”

Sigiswald and Adolphine’s divorce had now been formally arranged, as the promises tied to their marriage had not been kept. As a penalty for this breach of contract, Sigiswald was being made to forfeit part of his future duchy—land that was currently in the Sovereignty—to Drewanchel.

“Which portion?” Ferdinand asked.

“From north Lindenthal to Drewanchel,” Eglantine replied, indicating an area that was roughly the size of a lesser duchy. Drewanchel would receive an impressive expansion while Sigiswald’s land would shrink dramatically.

Ferdinand adjusted his map accordingly.

I paused to consider. “I suppose this means Lord Sigiswald will become the aub of a middle duchy.”

“Though the duchy will rank highly at first—having its first aub come from the royal family will do much for its reputation—it is far from Lady Nahelache’s home duchy of Hauchletzte and unlikely to receive much support. From next year onward, things are likely to become rather stressful for them.”

I shrugged. “Lord Trauerqual might have Dunkelfelger’s support through Lady Magdalena, but he is bound to have a much harder time ruling his portion of Werkestock and its many traitorous nobles. Lord Sigiswald is receiving land from the Sovereignty and should count his blessings as a result.” The mana everyone had provided during the Royal Academy’s Dedication Rituals had gone toward the Sovereignty and the land it managed, so I sincerely doubted Sigiswald would encounter any serious problems. He needed only to do his job as an aub.

“It would seem that Lady Adolphine intends to serve as a giebe upon returning to Drewanchel. She took great inspiration from you, Lady Rozemyne, and plans to turn her province into a ‘research city.’”

Adolphine’s failed marriage into royalty meant she would

struggle to find another partner outside her duchy. Thus, following her divorce, she planned to return to Drewanchel and become a giebe. Her duchy had the largest archducal family in the country and would soon be awash with returning Sovereign nobles, and she planned to marry someone from among them. I'd worried about her future, so it was good to hear she was moving forward.

"Rozemyne, if you have finished filling the foundation, redraw the borders," Ferdinand said. "The process is the same as when aubs redraw the borders for their giebes. Reference my map as you work. Oh, and Lady Eglantine—I do not mean to impose, but please grade her performance."

"Grade her...?" she repeated.

"You are the professor of the archduke candidate course, are you not? I was told that Rozemyne disappeared partway through winter and did not finish her Royal Academy lessons. I ask that you grade her redrawing of the borders and destruction of the medals in Ahrensbach. I would also appreciate you speaking to her whirling teacher and arranging for Rozemyne's performance today to be graded."

"You are demanding too much," I protested, speaking for my own sake as well as Eglantine's. "An impromptu exam now, of all times, is much too cruel. And does Lady Eglantine not deserve some time to prepare?"

Ferdinand scoffed, a stern glint in his eyes. "You should easily be able to pass if you remember everything I went out of my way to teach you. Do not tell me you forgot it all."

"N-No, I remember everything!"

Probably!

"Then I do not see the issue. In the first place, whom will you inconvenience most by delaying things?"

Trying not to think about the cold eyes bearing down on me, I took a moment to consider my answer. "You, Ferdinand. Then our retainers."

"Correct. I shall schedule your remaining exams and negotiate with your professors during the Archduke Conference. You need only to pass all of your classes at once. For now, however, focus on redrawing the borders."

I formed my schtappe and did my best to help Eglantine. Though my usual sandbox had been replaced with the country's foundation, as a divine avatar with divine power, I successfully

redrew the duchy borders and passed with flying colors.

Operation: Mana Drain

“Though I’m glad to have passed, I’ve still got mana to spare. What next?”

I’d redrawn the country’s borders, dyed the entire foundation, and even filled every magic tool on my way from the statue to the library’s exit. Yet my mana was still a quarter full, and the divine power I’d received from the gods remained. It was definitely unnatural; I doubted anything would be able to drain me completely.

“For now, fill any tools you might need when you take over as Aub Ahrensbach,” Ferdinand replied.

We parted ways with Eglantine and Anastasius, who needed to fetch Gervasio from the gate where he was imprisoned, and started toward Ahrensbach’s gathering spot. A teleportation door in the central building took us to the Adalgisa villa, whereupon Ferdinand urged me onto his highbeast.

“It really is a shame I can’t use Lessy...” I griped. Because of the gods, my mana no longer matched what was registered to his stone. “Flying around would drain a little more of my mana.”

“It would not have been wise while your memories are still fragmented,” Ferdinand shot back. I didn’t understand the reason for his concern, but it must have been important. “You have done so much, and your health is in such a sorry state that I would normally advise you to drink a rejuvenation potion before bed... but that will not be an option if we cannot drain your mana. We must act fast, or your stamina will run out first. There is a potion that uses mana to heal wounds and restore strength, but we should save it for the worst-case scenario; it is not suitable for you.”

“In what sense?” I asked. Did it taste even worse than the ultra-nasty version?

“To expend what remains of your mana, we would need to wound you. Gravely. We might be forced to cover your limbs in cuts or even shoot through them with—”

“Waaah! Stop! No way! I don’t want to go *that* far! No bleeding!

No pain!”

I shook my head so frantically that it must have been a blur. Ferdinand wore the solemn expression of a mad scientist observing his newest guinea pig. I would rather he not contemplate the gravest injury he could give me without putting my life in danger.

“The potion heals the wound all at once,” Ferdinand explained. “It may be quick, but the process is too unbearably agonizing to describe. That is why we must leave it as a last resort.”

“Have *you* ever used one?”

“Of course. You would not be the first person to whom I gave such a potion; though I cannot say whether anyone else has actually consumed one.”

He must have been referring to when he’d first developed the potion, which made his calm tone all the more unnerving. I wasn’t sure who had ended up as his test subject, but it couldn’t have been a welcome experience.

“But alas,” Ferdinand continued, “you have an aversion to pain. We have no choice but to rely on trial and error until we find the best way to rid you of your remaining mana. A few experiments should tell us if mana contributions not tied to a blessing are enough or if you can safely wield a divine instrument.”

I could only hope that praying was unnecessary—we would save ourselves a lot of time if so. That was why we had come straight to Ahrensbach’s gathering spot. Some of the nobles from the villa had accompanied us.

My eyes widened as I took in our surroundings. “This is even worse than Ehrenfest’s gathering spot used to be.” It must have been completely abandoned, as only the poorest ingredients dotted the grass. How would Ahrensbach’s students gather the materials they needed for their classes—or brew anything half decent, for that matter?

“I thought most duchies regenerated their gathering spots after being taught the prayer...” I muttered.

“The lesser and middle duchies on the losing side of the civil war lacked the mana and manpower to perform the ritual properly. Ahrensbach, on the other hand, had no excuse. Its gathering spot only looks so tragic because of Detlinde’s negligence and the hostility she feels toward you and the royal family.”

Ferdinand told the Ahrensbach knights and scholars not serving as his retainers to stay in the air, then descended to the gathering

spot. So barren was the space before us that not even feybeasts cared to frequent it. There were a few gathered, at most. Ehrenfest's spot hadn't been anywhere near as desolate, yet it had still drained me the first time I'd regenerated it. Our plan was sure to work.

"Rozemyne," Ferdinand said, "begin."

"Right."

At my request, Clarissa and Gretia removed my silver cloak. I got on my knees, then pressed my hands against the ground and channeled mana into the magic circle carved into it. The circle's outer edge shone green.

"Is your divine power going down?" Ferdinand asked.

"Not as far as I can tell. But all I'm doing is making the circle glow. If we want to heal the land, someone needs to chant the prayer."

"I shall do it. Continue to focus on your mana."

The magic circle activated as soon as Ferdinand started praying to Flutrane. It continued to shine as it rose above the ground. My mana steadily enriched the land, causing bushes to grow and young buds to blossom. Those of us from Ehrenfest were well acquainted with the sight, but for the Ahrensbach nobles who hadn't healed their gathering spot before, it was like watching a genuine miracle.

"Ooh! Spectacular! Mestionora's avatar is wielding her divine power!"

"To think the gathering spot could thrive in mere moments... I cannot believe my eyes."

As our spectators cried out in excitement, I felt the divine power of the gods swell within me.

"Well, Rozemyne?"

"It might not be as prominent as when I used the Goddess of Light's divine instrument, but there's a response. Replenishing this gathering spot required too much mana for the power to grow larger than it was before."

"I see. Then you can pour your mana into the barren land across Ahrensbach." Ferdinand gave the slightest smile, subtle enough that nobody else would notice. He must have been relieved that we had other options for draining my mana.

"Rather than going to all the trouble of performing Spring Prayer, do you think I could simply form a chalice with my schtappe and use that to distribute my mana?" I asked.

"That depends. How did your mana respond when you formed

the Goddess of Light's crown?"

I thought back to the ceremony. Eglantine's vow had caused the instrument to flash and the divine power within me to swell. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea after all.

"Your expression tells me all that I need to know," Ferdinand said.

"In that case, maybe I could channel mana into the temple's divine instruments. They were made by a Zent of the past, so they shouldn't break that easily. We could soar over Ahrensbach with Geduldh's chalice, showering the land with mana."

"Hmm..." Ferdinand placed a hand on his chin and cast his eyes down, mulling over my suggestion. "I cannot envision it going well, but it *would* make Spring Prayer simpler to complete. Your mana could also be used to brew with. I just acquired new materials."

"Maybe, but most feystones and magic tools would turn to gold dust the moment I touched them," I said, thinking back to the chain I'd received from Sigiswald. Overwhelming a feystone wasn't too much of an issue, but I was afraid of what my mana might do to a magic tool.

"You need not stress," Ferdinand assured me. "Any dust you inadvertently create can be put toward your library city. Given the urgency of performing the *entwickeln*, I plan to make as much dust as we require from the materials we gather here." We needed to repair the damage done by the Lanzenavians and destroy the Lanzenave Estate, severing its connection to the villa Eglantine planned to move in to.

"If *entwickeln* didn't use the names of the supreme gods, I would make my city at once," I grumbled, my lips pursed. "I need to use this mana before it kills me, but I can't put any toward the things that actually interest me."

Ferdinand gave me a comforting pat on the head. "Complaining will not change the situation. We have solutions for your excess mana, at least. Let us test them one by one."

"True enough..." A genuine smile arose on my face as I gazed up at him. "I really am glad to have you here with me."

He knit his brow, then turned to the nobles in the sky above us. "Cease your chattering and gather! We shall turn the materials you collect into gold dust for an *entwickeln* that will repair the damage done to Ahrensbach by the Lanzenavians. Look out for any that are elementally rich, and remember that they will soon form the estates

you call your homes.”

The nobles tensed up and went straight to gathering. Hartmut approached them in his High Priest robes, having dumped the post-ceremony cleanup on the Sovereign nobles.

“The abysmal state of Ahrensbach’s gathering spot meant that Lady Rozemyne had to replenish it with her divine power. Make no mistake, though—once the materials for the *entwickeln* have been gathered, future replenishments will fall to the duchy’s students or the adults attending the Archduke Conference. Are you aware that the perception of religious ceremonies has improved in the Royal Academy and that the nobles of other duchies have begun praying to obtain further divine protections? Perhaps not, as Ahrensbach never participated in any of the Academy’s ceremonies.”

Clarissa nodded vigorously in agreement and flourished her blue cape. “The nobles of Dunkelfelger have been performing religious ceremonies day in and day out.”

Translation: they’re playing nonstop ditter.

Hannelore had mentioned something of the sort—that they were using the research of pre- and post-ditter ceremonies as a pretext to play even more matches than usual. I couldn’t remember when, though.

Hartmut continued, “Ahrensbach must also start performing ceremonies at the Royal Academy. Otherwise, its students will end up obtaining the fewest divine protections of any duchy despite being overseen by Lady Rozemyne. Do not forget that Ahrensbach has fallen behind in matters of religion and prayer due to the obstinate ignorance of the now-imprisoned Detlinde.”

Again, Clarissa nodded. “The Divine Avatar of Mestionora shall take over as Ahrensbach’s aub and free the duchy from the sway of Chaocipher, Goddess of Chaos. But if you and everyone else are loath to perform ceremonies, her compassion might soon dry up.”

And with that, the pair’s brainwashing of the Ahrensbach nobles was complete. They went straight to gathering materials, intense looks on their faces.

“Strahl,” Ferdinand said, “oversee the gathering and transport of any materials to the Ehrenfest Dormitory. Rozemyne will turn them into gold dust. Her retainers should return to the dormitory with her. Lieseleta and the others are sure to have everything ready.”

“Understood.”

No sooner had we returned to the Ehrenfest Dormitory than Sylvester and the others came rushing over. Those in the audience had clearly felt the rise in my divine power, and they'd started to worry when I'd taken leave of the ceremony without any indication that I would return.

"We've prepared a meeting room, as requested," Sylvester announced. "I won't ask you, Ferdinand—I already know you were sneaking around during the ceremony—but Rozemyne, how are you?"

"You will find out soon enough," Ferdinand replied on my behalf, indicating that I would be the topic of our conversation while urging the archducal couple into the other room. Everyone else was made to step outside, leaving only the four of us, and an area-affecting sound-blocker was activated.

"I will spare you all the more complicated details," Ferdinand said. "Mestionora descended into Rozemyne again, and various other gods granted her their divine power, all so she could fill Yurgenschmidt's foundation with mana."

"And did she?" Sylvester asked.

"She did, but the divine power in her body remains. It is beyond what a mortal vessel can bear, so she must be drained and dyed with human mana posthaste." He had elected not to mention that this was all the result of the gods getting carried away and making an unfortunate mistake.

As attentive as ever, Sylvester immediately understood what Ferdinand was trying to say. "So... the gods ordered you to summon winter early?"

"As persistent as always, but that is not what we are here to discuss. Rozemyne has unique circumstances; her color changes freely, and dyeing her will come easily whether winter arrives early or not. Thus, there is no need to do as you imply—I will give her the potion and peer into her memories as before."

It was hard not to notice the prickly atmosphere surrounding the two. Ferdinand was pretty much glaring at Sylvester, his features twisted in a displeased grimace.

I cocked my head at the pair. "Um, what does it mean to summon winter early? The phrase has come up a lot as of late, but its meaning eludes me. At most, I'm aware that it isn't being used literally."

The archducal couple froze at once, smiles plastered on their faces, and the mood in the room grew much heavier than before. It was like I'd dropped a bombshell. I didn't know what I'd done wrong, but I could sense that it was serious.

"My apologies," I said. "Should I not have asked? I thought it best to, since this clearly has something to do with me. If you would rather I consult someone else, tell me."

"Out of everyone in the dormitory... Rihyarda might be your best bet," Sylvester replied. "But don't blame me if you regret asking her."

Ferdinand exchanged a look with his brother, then heaved a frustrated sigh. The matter had something to do with him as well, it seemed.

As I debated whether to ask Rihyarda, Florencia rested a hand on her cheek. "Indeed, this is not something two men should tell you. But do not ask Rihyarda; I shall explain instead. To understand what it means for winter to come before autumn, one must first consider the latter's symbolism."

"Autumn stands for ripening and the harvest, does it not? Schutzaria's divine instrument represents defense and protection... And she has many artistic subordinates, so the season sometimes portrays art in general. There are also new revelations and the passing of time. And... farewells, I suppose?"

Now that I thought about it, autumn had so many meanings. According to the books I'd read, at least.

"In recent love stories, Jugereise tends to signify lost love and separations," I continued. "In the bible, however, she is more a symbol of young adults leaving the nest. Male archduke candidates leaving their castle upon coming of age and women leaving their duchy upon being wed tended to pray for her divine protection."

My thorough understanding of the bible and the language used within its stories was one of the main reasons why modern love stories confused me. The allusions to various gods were confusing on their own, and it didn't help that their symbolism had changed so much over the years.

"How does someone with all the pieces still not know how to combine them?" Ferdinand asked, pressing a hand against his forehead.

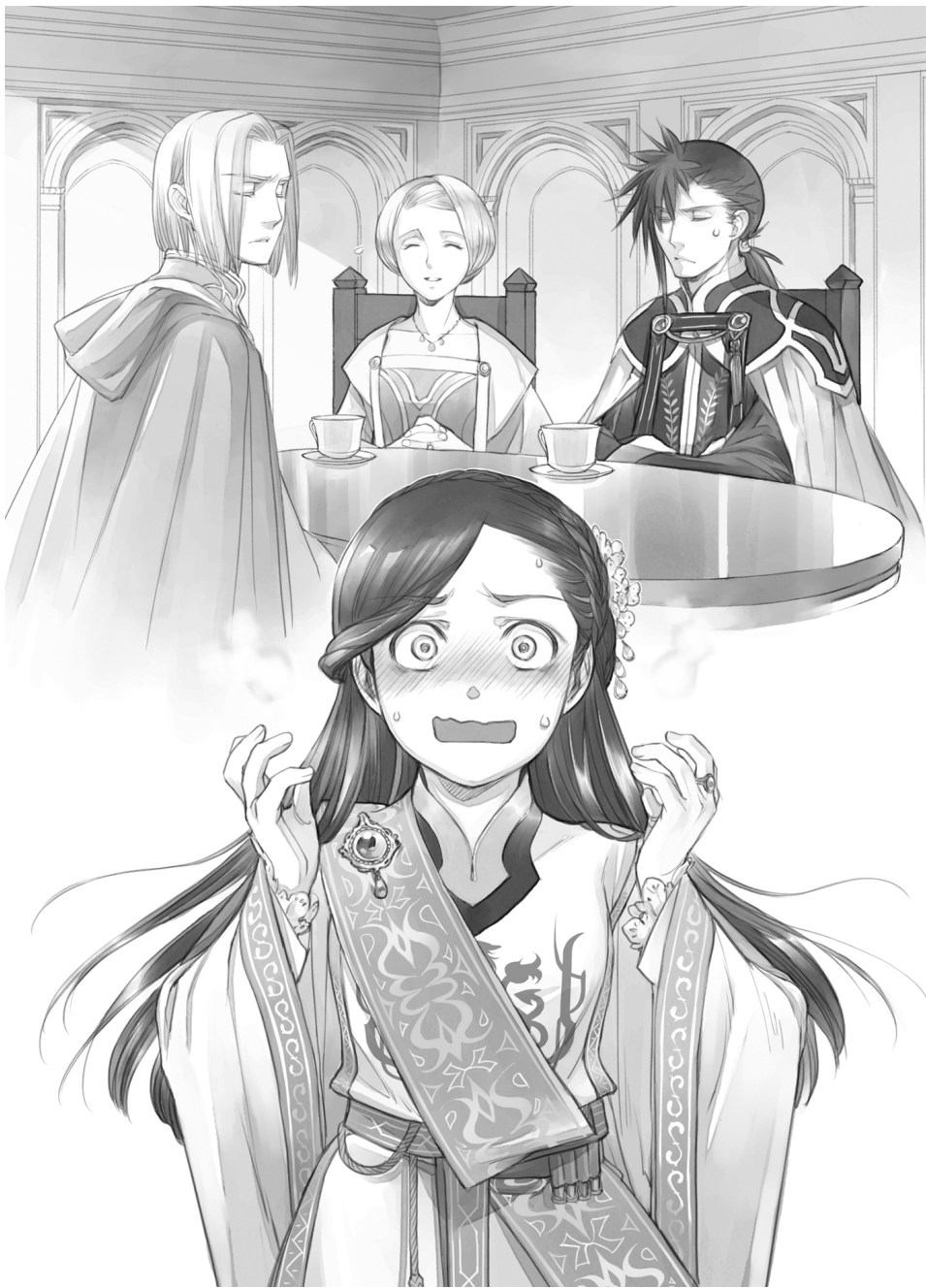
"You may set those interpretations aside for now," Florencia told me. "As well as harvests and the like, autumn signifies ripening

—the coming of age. Now, think about the associations with winter and how the primary gods act during the cold season.” A slight smile graced her lips. “Your understanding from the bible will do.”

“Well, from a biblical perspective, that would mean not waiting for someone to come of age before... HYAAAAAAH?!”

The moment I made the connection, I was overcome with embarrassment. No wonder everyone felt so awkward. I also remembered telling Eglantine that I would get Ferdinand to dye me once I used up all my mana. In hindsight, that wasn’t something to be said so openly.

NOOO! SOMEONE, TURN BACK TIME! BEGONE, THIS MOMENT! THOU ART HIDEOUS BEYOND MEASURE!



I now understood the reason for Eglantine's perplexed, somewhat uncomfortable expression, and it made me want to cry. The embarrassment was too much to bear. I slid out of my seat and pounded my fists against the thick carpet, thwarted in my desperate attempt to dig a deep hole and dive straight into it.

"Figured it out, did you?" Sylvester asked. "And now you want the earth to swallow you up. We've all been there, believe me."

"No... Y-You don't get it," I choked. "This is awful... Calling winter early, skipping autumn, dyeing one's mana... It all... It all means...!" My mouth merely opened and closed as words failed me.

Ferdinand peered down at me, an understanding look on his face. "You have nothing to fear. I will not be doing anything of the sort." He had told me that asking to be dyed in someone else's colors was a fairly direct invitation, so why hadn't I noticed the connection to dyeing mana?

Because he dyed me with potions and magic tools whenever the need arose.

"The fault lies with you, Ferdinand!"

"No, the fault lies with your abnormal upbringing. And if you wish to point fingers, then you are even more to blame for your poor intuition and failure to grasp noble euphemisms."

"Her abnormal... upbringing?" Florencia asked, looking around in surprise. She must not have known that I was a commoner with the Devouring or that I bore the Mark of Ewigeliebe. Was now the time to tell her?

I eyed the two men in the room. They exchanged glances, then shook their heads at me.

"Though I cannot yet tell you the details," Ferdinand replied in my stead, "Rozemyne has physical attributes that distinguish her from other nobles—attributes that have put her under the influence of my mana since before her adoption into the archducal family. If I dye her again, her name-sworn will sense only that her mana has returned to normal."

It wasn't that hard to detect changes to another person's mana capacity. Changes to the color of their mana, however, were another story. If someone dyed my mana, only my name-sworn would notice, no matter how great the change might be.

"In other words," he continued, "there is nothing to worry

about. I will spread the news that Rozemyne's divine power faded when she gave Lady Eglantine the Grutrissheit."

"Just a moment!" I exclaimed. "My mana was still divinely dyed when Lady Eglantine gave me her name! She'll come to the same conclusions as Sylvester and Florencia! And even if we use a potion... Um... Mana-dyeing is, I mean... D-Doesn't one need to be Starbound before...? Ngh, it's all one big misunderstanding!" I cradled my head and groaned in shame, tears welling from my eyes.

"Keep your emotions under control," Ferdinand warned me. "The divine power within you will grow as unstable as your mana."

"How can I? I mean, we're..."

It was my first time being the focus of such an embarrassing discussion. I didn't have any experience with the subject matter, and the last thing I'd ever expected was to be drawn into a conversation like this. My only fiancé had said that being engaged to me was *painful*, for goodness' sake! I was so uncomfortable that I wanted to die.

Sylvester looked at me and sighed. "There's no point arguing with him. Anyone else would understand what you're going through even now that we're all on the same page, but Ferdinand doesn't know the first thing about a young woman's heart."

"Yes, I'm aware..." I muttered, though I still gave Sylvester my sharpest glower.

Ferdinand grimaced and gestured to my seat. "Then enough with this unseemly behavior of yours. You cannot use a rejuvenation potion until your mana has been fully drained, and your stamina must not run dry before then."

Faced with such a thick carpet, I wouldn't be burrowing into the earth anytime soon. I got up and returned to the table.

"Now, if we could return to the matter at hand..." Ferdinand said. "Rozemyne's mana must be fully drained to eliminate the divine power within her. Of course, that is much easier said than done."

Divine mana was tough to drain, and that was far from the worst of our problems. If my normal mana regenerated too soon, it would clash with the divine power that lingered in my body and eventually kill me. Sylvester's and Florencia's eyes widened as Ferdinand continued with his explanation.

"As I am sure you know, Ahrensbach is in dire need of an entwickeln. I plan to use Rozemyne's excess mana to produce gold

dust, a portion of which I shall give to Gerlach as compensation for the estate she destroyed. To that end, I ask that you deliver materials to her over the course of today. The materials from Ahrensbach's gathering spot will not be enough, so I would request Ehrenfest's assistance as well."

There was a brief pause before Ferdinand said, "Oh, another point of note—as part of our entwickeln, we intend to construct houses for the Gutenbergs. I would appreciate copies of the schematics used for the entwickeln in Groschel; the Plantin and Gilberta Companies designed their own stores there, as I recall."

For the city's other workshops, Ferdinand would take inspiration from Ahrensbach's standard architecture.

"Could you tell the Gutenbergs to start their move?" he continued. "Rozemyne will need subordinates, so I wish for at least some of them to be living in Ahrensbach by the end of the Archduke Conference. They should already be preparing to leave, so I doubt this will cause them much trouble."

I nodded in agreement. Even for commoners, Ferdinand's demands were anything but unreasonable. The Gutenbergs needed to move at the same time as me if they wanted to settle into their new roles.

"That won't be a problem, but..." Sylvester turned to me. "Rozemyne, won't you want to meet with them and give the order personally?"

Despite the circumstances, I still remembered some of the Gutenbergs. Benno and Mark, for example. I missed them and would have appreciated a reunion, but there were huge gaps in my memories of the lower city.

I shook my head and replied, "The goddess's descent fragmented my memory." Then I gazed at Ferdinand. "Would my hairpin craftsperson attend such a meeting?"

"I suspect so," he replied. "I would advise you against seeing the Gutenbergs. It would end in disarray whether you remember them or not, and your untamed divine mana would endanger your life and the lives of all those around you. At the very least, wait until your divine mana has been purged and a meeting without retainers can be arranged."

I cocked my head at him, not really understanding his concern. It was hard to imagine how I might react to people I couldn't even remember.

Ferdinand's eyes lowered when he saw my reaction. "Sylvester—though we plan to stay here tonight for the creation of our gold dust, we will need to return to Ahrensbach tomorrow whether Rozemyne's mana is depleted or not. If we do not finish draining her now after everything we have done, there will not be a second chance; she will succumb to the divine power clashing with her restored mana and climb the towering stairway... as will all those name-sworn to her."

Sylvester squeezed his eyes shut; in that worst-case scenario, Eglantine would die immediately after becoming the Zent. "At this rate, Rozemyne really will end up with the country's future on her shoulders. And she's lost her memories? This is far too great a burden for her. Rozemyne, do you go out looking for trouble or are you unlucky enough that it simply finds you?"

"I am quite alright," I replied, trying to console him. "I am barely even aware of my lost memories. As long as I do not focus on them, they do not inconvenience me in the slightest."

Ferdinand shook his head. "That is no excuse to act so unconcerned. As it stands, you will never be able to regain your memories." He then picked me up without so much as a warning and strode toward the door.

"She's in your hands, Ferdinand," Sylvester called after us. "I'll do everything I can to help." He sent out an ordonnanz announcing that our meeting was over, and the doors opened as his retainers moved to enter.

"Ferdinand, let me down," I said. "I'm perfectly capable of walking." I would really rather he not carry me to my room when I'd just learned the meaning of winter coming before autumn and the significance of asking someone to dye you with their mana.

"Certainly not. We must preserve your stamina at all costs. If we do not drain the rest of your mana tonight, you will need to supply Ahrensbach while unable to use rejuvenation potions. Do you not understand the gravity of your situation? We must put you at the greatest ease."

Which is exactly why I want you to put me down! Geez! Just how dense can one man be?!

Gold Dust and Going Back

“Move,” Ferdinand said, brushing aside Sylvester’s retinue while carrying me out of the room. “You are in our way.” His quick march brought us back to our retainers, who looked stunned to see me in his arms.

“Did something happen to Lady Rozemyne?!” Hartmut exclaimed, rushing over at once. I’d thought he would tease or chastise me for being carried, but the panic in his voice told me he feared the worst.

Cornelius was watching us just as closely. Though he seemed to want to say something, he didn’t look upset that Ferdinand was holding me.

Um... Am I the only one who thinks this is weird...?

“Take care that Rozemyne does not try to walk anywhere,” Ferdinand said. “She must preserve as much of her strength as she can. Depending on the circumstances, she might not be able to use rejuvenation potions.”

“Really?” Hartmut asked. “Not even those that primarily replenish stamina?” He and the other retainers stared intently at Ferdinand as they awaited an answer.

“As you said, those potions *primarily* replenish stamina,” Ferdinand replied, his frustration more than apparent. “They still target mana to some degree, and even the slightest increase in Rozemyne’s mana will cause her divine power to swell and put a strain on her body. As we do not have time to research a potion that will serve our purpose, I would rather we avoid them entirely.”

And with that, he handed me over to Angelica.

“This must be very hard for you,” she said to me.

I averted my eyes. As much as Angelica was trying to console me, I wasn’t sure she truly understood the problem; her tone was too subtle for me to tell. There must have been a vast divide between the actual issue and what others thought I was going through.

I guess there are more important things to consider than how to save

face the next time I see Lady Eglantine.

Ferdinand had picked me up without batting an eye, and not a single one of our retainers had considered it strange. Nobody had even mentioned it, which only added to my embarrassment. I was embarrassed for having been embarrassed in the first place!

Looking back, romance had always seemed alien to me, even when I was living in Japan. I already knew that nothing was going to happen, so why was I stressing? There was zero chance of me ever being caught up in some dramatic love story.

Books are my one true love! The Super Monster Bookworm—that was what people used to call me, right? No one this obsessed with reading needs to worry about getting drawn into a normal relationship. And a relationship with Ferdinand, of all people? Unthinkable. I'm getting worked up over nothing.

I took a few deep breaths to steady my nerves. As much as my blunder with Eglantine hurt, my interactions with Ferdinand weren't scandalous enough to warrant any criticism.

But, wait... It wasn't that long ago that everyone was telling me to keep the proper distance from him. Are they turning a blind eye to it because this is an emergency? No, that can't be right. It was an emergency back then too.

I was about to query Ferdinand when he returned to addressing our retainers. "Though we hope to drain Rozemyne tonight by creating an excess of gold dust, her mana is depleting far too slowly for us to assume we shall succeed. We can also expect her mana to replenish overnight—not by much, but enough that it bears mentioning. I must ask you all to be ready for a trip across Ahrensbach tomorrow."

I'd thought my retainers would oppose the sudden change to our schedule, but I was wrong. At most, a few asked whether I truly was that pressed for time, anxiety clear on their faces.

"Those of you who received permission to accompany Rozemyne to Ahrensbach, gather your things from the dormitory and prepare to perform Spring Prayer," Ferdinand instructed. "The duchy's last harvest was far from generous, so take special care to arrange chefs and whatever ingredients they might need. I shall bring stamina rejuvenation potions for Rozemyne in case they become absolutely necessary. Hartmut, stay in your robes and go fetch the divine instruments from Ahrensbach's temple. Nobody will protest if you say we are using them for Spring Prayer. We might as

well take this opportunity to fill the tools with divine mana.”

Everything made sense so far. The chalice might already contain mana from the blue priests, but that didn’t matter; we would use it all during Spring Prayer anyway.

“Rihyarda,” Ferdinand continued, “Ahrensbach knights should soon start arriving with materials to be turned into gold dust. Please station an Ehrenfest scholar or attendant by the door to welcome them. I also expect ordonnanzes to arrive asking to meet with Rozemyne about today’s ceremony. Reject them all, be they from the aubs of other duchies or the royal family.”

“Understood,” Rihyarda said. Draining my mana came above all else; any of the duchies’ or royals’ concerns could wait until the Archduke Conference.

Ferdinand then turned to me. “Rozemyne, I shall use these rainbow feystones to create as many large highbeast stones as I can. Dye them with your mana, stick them together, and turn them into a highbeast you can use with your current mana.”

“I thought you didn’t want me to make a highbeast.”

“I would rather you not modify *any* feystones while your memory is splintered, but alas... There is far too much at stake.”

This must have been a tough call for Ferdinand—the bitter look on his face revealed all—but I still didn’t understand the connection between my lost memories and using feystones. Highbeasts were a great way of getting around while also using up some of my mana; of course I was going to make the most of this opportunity.

“That said, won’t the highbeast become unusable once my divine power runs out?” I asked. “This feels like a waste of all those rainbow feystones.”

Making a highbeast was all well and good, but I wouldn’t be able to use it once my mana changed color. I supposed that Ferdinand might be able to use the feystone in a brew of some kind, but no ideas came to mind; it wouldn’t be anywhere near as useful as all-purpose gold dust.

“It very well might be a waste, but this trip will take days, and some of your retainers are not used to traveling. You will need somewhere you can all rest. Though staying at the giebes’ estates is one option, I intend to give each of them an especially wide berth; they would only drain your stamina further. That leaves us with staying in a farming town’s winter estate or sleeping outside. Your knights are used to both, I suspect, but I doubt the same can be said

for your attendants. We must ensure they have somewhere safe and comfortable to stay.”

I clapped my hands together in realization. Staying at the giebess’ estates would mean long formal greetings and dinners spent socializing. I’d already been told to avoid rejuvenation potions, so I wouldn’t survive consecutive days of mingling with nobles I didn’t know. And then there was the matter of my attendants; they wouldn’t have any experience of sleeping outside, but my expandable Pandabus would put their minds at ease.

At long last, Ferdinand acknowledges the worth of my Pandabus!

“Once you have made your highbeast feystone, start turning the ingredients brought here into gold dust. I will ask you tomorrow morning how much your mana recovered during the night, so be mindful of your quantity before you sleep. Avoid doing or speaking about anything that might unnecessarily cost you stamina or disturb your emotions.” He paused, then sternly summarized what he’d told me: “Be patient and simply continue to turn the delivered materials into gold dust. Do not forget that a threat to your life puts all your name-sworn at risk as well.”

Several of the people around me gulped. Their lives were in my hands, and the pressure weighed heavily upon me.

“The nobles in the villa will return sequentially to Ahrensbach,” Ferdinand said. “Everyone, be ready to move to the villa when necessary. Rihyarda, I entrust Rozemyne to you.”

“You may count on me,” she replied.

Having doled out the last of his instructions, Ferdinand marched off with Eckhart and Justus in tow. Hartmut didn’t even wait for them to leave before he turned on his heel and started making his way upstairs.

“Let us hurry as well,” he said.

My retainers sprang into action, moving busily around the dormitory. Many of them would return to Ahrensbach ahead of me. Charlotte arrived with her retainers a brief moment later to deliver some of the materials the knights had foraged from Ehrenfest’s gathering spot.

“Mother explained what a tremendous strain the gods’ divine power is putting on your body and the urgency with which your mana needs to be drained. I can only hope these materials are of use to you. Karstedt just led a contingent of knights to Ehrenfest’s gathering spot, so there are plenty more materials to come.”

Charlotte watched my retainers hurry around the dormitory while her own brought over bags of materials. Time really was of the essence, so we'd expected attendants and scholars to oversee the delivery. We weren't ready to give her a proper greeting.

"Rihyarda," I said.

"I advised Lady Charlotte not to come, but she insisted on speaking with you, milady."

I returned my attention to my little sister; there must have been a reason for her persistence. Her eyebrows met above her nose in a troubled frown.

"I see the preparations for your departure are already being made... I am relieved to see it. Upon hearing Mother's explanation, I thought it best that you leave the Royal Academy. I came here to propose just that."

Though she claimed to be relieved, Charlotte's indigo eyes wavered with concern. Was she aware of something that had escaped my notice?

"Charlotte... Is there a reason for your urgency?" I asked.

"The Royal Academy has closer ties to the gods than anywhere else in Yurgenschmidt. You made that clear to us all, did you not? As did the lights that appeared during its religious ceremonies. I would assume, then, that the gods' sway is at its strongest here. Going elsewhere should reduce the burden of the divine power on your body."

I stared at her. That... made a lot of sense, actually. Though I'd already known that the Academy was the country's holy land, I'd never stopped to consider the impact it might be having on my divine power.

"Knowing that Uncle has set your departure in motion puts my mind at ease," Charlotte said. "After all, Sister... in your limitless compassion for others, you seldom seem to consider your own needs."

"I... daresay that is untrue. Going forward, I plan to build my very own library city and spend my days surrounded by books." I'd paused only because, at one point in time, death hadn't seemed all that bad. The promise of Mestionora's library had gotten its hooks into me, and now that I was banned, I'd resolved to continue living for the sake of winning her over again.

Charlotte's brow furrowed in response. Had she noticed my hesitation? She opened her mouth to respond, then closed it again,

her arms crossed over her chest like she was desperately trying not to reach out to me.

“Charlotte?”

“I hope to one day visit this library city of yours, so please... do what you can to be rid of your divine mana. If you will excuse me. I should not like to get in the way of your retainers.”

She departed as quickly as she'd arrived. I wanted to speak with her for a little while longer, but my hands were tied; we really didn't have the time to host a guest.

I got straight to work turning the materials Charlotte had delivered into gold dust. The process was as simple as sticking my hand into each bag and swirling it around until nothing solid remained. Transforming the materials would have been easy even without my divine power, so my mana barely decreased at all.

I'll devote my all to making this gold dust for Ehrenfest and my library city... but I really don't think it's going to help much.

In the meantime, I received a fresh batch of materials from Ahrensbach's knights. I pressed on and continued to make gold dust.

Come dinnertime, Ferdinand sent me a bag of rainbow feystones. I ate, then filled them all with mana and fused them together by repeating the words “round, round, sticky clay” in my head. My deity-dyed mana must have impacted the process because my Pandabus ended up not light yellow but rainbow colored.

Uh-oh. Lessy's taken an unexpected turn. His new complexion looks so weird.

Still, manipulating such a large mass of rainbow feystones had drained some of my mana. I strove to keep making gold dust until it was time for bed.

I ate breakfast before being changed into my ceremonial High Bishop robes and carried to the common room. There, I continued to make gold dust until the very moment Ferdinand arrived.

“Rozemyne, how much mana did you recover overnight?” he asked.

“Well... As much as I spent forming my rainbow highbeast and creating all the gold dust,” I answered, my lips pursed. Any progress I'd made the night before had already been undone, and my night's sleep had left me feeling worse than before I'd gone to bed.

Ferdinand pressed a hand against his forehead. “You regained

that much in a single night? Is the divine power causing you pain or doing anything else of note?"

"As one would expect, it gets worse as more of my mana recovers. I'm still only a quarter full, though, so I'm fine." It certainly wasn't as bad as before, when I'd crumpled to the ground and erupted in screams. I just felt heavy and a little absent-minded, like I was battling a fever.

His expression hardened. "For someone who has not consumed a rejuvenation potion, that is still deeply concerning. We are running out of time."

Damuel and Judithe were my only knights for the moment; the others were in Ahrensbach making the last of their preparations. Ferdinand addressed them at once.

"I shall depart with Rozemyne. Strive to ensure that her associates can move from Ehrenfest to the new duchy immediately after the Archduke Conference."

"Yes, sir!"

Ferdinand picked me up and carried me away as though it were the most natural thing in the world. We exited the dormitory to find Ahrensbach's knights and nobles from other duchies waiting for us. The latter group knelt at the sight of me; we wouldn't get anywhere while they were blocking the corridor.

"O divine avatar, we ask that you grace not just Ahrensbach but also our duchies with your blessings and wisdom."

I didn't know how to respond. In my current state, even a perfunctory blessing would produce unwanted consequences. I clung to Ferdinand, who sternly shook his head and whispered to me.

"They are pleading for the losers of the civil war to receive more favor than Ahrensbach, the duchy that caused this mess to begin with. You can simply ignore them. They consider you a divine avatar—someone whose authority exceeds even that of the new Zent—but will turn away from you as soon as the divinity in your mana fades."

Ferdinand then signaled Ahrensbach's knights with a glance and addressed the crowd: "The minutiae of the civil war rests with the royal family. It is beneath a divine avatar. Now *move*. There are places we must be."

At once, Ahrensbach's knights started pushing the gathered nobles aside to make a path for me, chastising them all the while.

They were desperate themselves; the future of their duchy depended on me.

Ferdinand strode past the dormitories' teleportation doors, then placed a hand on a door beyond even those connected to the royal villas.

As I recalled, the Adalgisa villa comprised two buildings: one for women and pre-baptismal children and another for baptized branch royals. Ferdinand took me to the latter, where we would use the teleportation circle to the Lanzenave Estate. We headed toward it without the slightest pause.

"Have the knights returned to Ahrensbach?" I asked. "This place feels abandoned now."

"Correct. They have no more business in the Royal Academy now that the prisoners have been handed over and the transference ceremony is complete. Remember also that the villa is being repurposed as a home for the new Zent. The sooner we leave, the better."

"True. Should we get the attendants to give it one last clean?"

"There is no need. It is far more important that we seal the teleporter, ensuring that no one from Ahrensbach can intrude upon the new Zent's estate."

We made our way down a long corridor. My silver cloak restricted my vision, but I soon heard the clatter of armor and several doors open. Then it grew dark, which told me we had arrived in the windowless teleporter room.

"We shall go first," Ferdinand said.

Only three people could use the teleporter at a time, so we went ahead with Eckhart. My retainers were waiting for us on the other end. Ferdinand practically dropped me into Angelica's arms, then turned with a flourish and returned to the villa.

"I was told that Lord Ferdinand wished to perform some final checks before completely sealing the villa," Leonore explained. "We would rather not risk anyone invading us through the villa as a result of a misunderstanding or the like."

As I understood it, we were closing the teleporter so that Ahrensbach wouldn't have a back door to the Royal Academy. But from Ahrensbach's perspective, it was to prevent invasions from other duchies.

"Everything is ready for you, Lady Rozemyne," Hartmut informed me. "We have been instructed to first return to the castle.

Let us travel by highbeast. Would you like to use your own to further deplete your mana? It was brought to my attention that you made a new highbeast with your divine mana.” He wasn’t even trying to hide his excitement.

I nodded in response. Angelica set me down, allowing me to reveal my brand-new Rainbow Lessy to my retainers.

“His shape is the same, but not the color,” I said as I climbed into my one-person Pandabus. Then, unable to hide my disappointment, “He isn’t quite as cute as before...”

“Oh, no! That isn’t true at all,” everyone replied, trying to console me.

Ngh... My retainers are so sweet!

“Though it might not be cute, it certainly looks divine,” Hartmut said. “A most fitting vehicle for a divine avatar.”

“Indeed,” Leonore added. “Never have I seen a highbeast glitter with all the elements! It is a sight to behold.”

I’d assumed they were just being kind, but their compliments were genuine—they really thought my rainbow highbeast looked more divine. Lessy was far cuter when he was light yellow, in my opinion, but even grun-haters welcomed the omni-elemental sparkles.

Sorry... I just don’t understand the aesthetics of this world.

The others continued to praise my highbeast as we made our way back to the castle. Once again, my opinions deviated from the norm. Even the Ahrensbach nobles at the castle were in awe of Lessy’s omni-elemental sheen, while Letizia and her retainers welcomed me with sparkles in their eyes.

“Your highbeast looks beautiful, Lady Rozemyne.”

“I can feel the divine power of all the gods radiating from our new aub’s highbeast. How divine...!”

He looks the same as before! Is a change of color really enough to warrant all this praise?!

Hartmut put his mount away and drew me back from my thoughts. “Lady Rozemyne, dismiss your highbeast and sit over there, if you would.”

We had alighted on the castle’s largest balcony—the perfect landing spot for highbeasts. It connected to a pleasant hall where guests sometimes took their lunch and gazed out across the ocean. Though the room was mostly full of what I assumed to be my retainers’ bags, a vacant seat awaited me in the corner. The divine

instruments sat atop the table beside it.

“The instruments are from Ahrensbach’s temple,” Hartmut said. “We humbly request that you fill them for us. Per a request from Lord Ferdinand, I must also ask you to check whether the chalice can be used to drain your mana.”

I started channeling my mana into the divine instruments. It would take a group of blue priests the best part of a day to fill them all, but I completed the first one—the chalice—almost immediately. The nobles around me cheered in response.

“Oh my!” one exclaimed. “The divine instruments were not always this easy to fill, were they?”

“Such an abundance of mana!” cried another.

In contrast to the nobles’ delight, I was feeling a little disappointed; though my mana had decreased, I was far from being empty.

From there, I picked up and tipped the chalice. Rainbow liquid poured out in response, mimicking the color of my mana. It was an unusual sight for someone who had performed so many Spring Prayers in the past, but I supposed it made sense; only when one prayed to the Goddess of Water did the liquid turn green.

“Lady Rozemyne, how fares your mana?” Hartmut asked. He had watched me test the chalice and now eyed me just as closely.

I focused on my mana. “Perhaps because I skipped the prayer, the divine power within me remains stable.”

“I am glad to hear it,” Hartmut said, visibly relieved. “Then you should not have any trouble filling the other instruments.”

“The usual prayer makes the mana turn green, Flutrane’s divine color. Are we sure this rainbow liquid can restore the earth?”

“Let us experiment.”

Hartmut took the chalice from me, then threw some of the liquid out into the castle’s garden. I couldn’t see where it landed—I was told to stay seated to preserve my stamina—but the nobles on the balcony cried out in awe.

“The flowers are blooming!”

“And the grass looks greener than before.”

Soon enough, the nobles were praising my virtues as a divine avatar. The whole song and dance was getting tiresome. I wanted nothing more than to purge the gods’ power from my body—they had forced it upon me, and it really didn’t seem all that special—but what would that mean for the future? Did the people here

realize I would return to normal once the divine power was out of my system?

And will they still recognize me as an aub when it's gone?

Unease spread through my chest. As much as I wanted to be rid of my divine power, I was starting to fear losing it. A small voice in my head told me to keep it—for the duchy's sake as well as my own.

"Lady Rozemyne shall use this power to purify Ahrensbach and restore its land..." one of the nobles cooed, giddy with joy. Hartmut overheard them and almost laughed.

"You misunderstand. Lady Rozemyne is not here to restore your sinful duchy—she is preparing it for her own creation. Ahrensbach shall crumble, and a library city shall rise in its place."

"In its current state, this duchy is not good enough to become Lady Rozemyne's new home," Clarissa added. "You have two choices: cling to your Ahrensbach roots and face punishment or worship Lady Rozemyne as vassals of her new duchy. We must not have taught you well enough."

Hartmut gave a firm nod of agreement. In one fell swoop, they had cleared up one of my concerns and given rise to another. I didn't want to build my city in a duchy of obsessed cultists. In an ideal world, its residents would all be bookworms. *Ordinary* bookworms.

"Hartmut, Clarissa..."

"Truth be told, Lady Rozemyne, we received a letter from the new Zent," Hartmut said, turning back to me without missing a beat. "She wishes to know the name, color, and desired crest of your new duchy so that she can announce them during the Archduke Conference. Lord Ferdinand said you could decide after Spring Prayer, but I disagree; we should make our intentions clear and put any misunderstandings about this duchy's future to rest. Have you come up with a name for your library city?"

A name...

I paused in thought. What name would suit an entire city of books? I could already feel my excitement growing as ideas shot through my mind. No matter what Ahrensbach's nobles said, my desire to turn this duchy into my very own library stretched up into the sky like an ever-growing beanstalk. It made me so emotional that I almost prayed to Bluanfah the Goddess of Sprouts.

Not so fast, Rozemyne. Stay calm.

Just thinking about a name and crest made my dream creation seem all the more real. I was already drafting the speech I would give during the Archduke Conference.

How about Alexandria, the ancient port city with its very own library and gardens? Or maybe Venezia, the trade city that accumulated more bookstores than anywhere else in the world after printing was invented. I could also name it after one of the other great libraries back on Earth. Aah, what a tough choice!

I was enjoying my internal debate when Ferdinand and those with him arrived on their highbeasts. "I am here at last," he said. "Let us begin Spring Prayer at once."

"Ferdinand, which name do you think I should choose for my new duchy?" I asked eagerly. "Venezia or Alexandria?"

"Is this really the time?" he responded with an exceptionally cold stare. "We are in a state of emergency."

"True, but emergencies are the *best* time to contemplate the fun things in life. It boosts morale! I guess you're right, though; the name of my new duchy isn't of the utmost importance right now. Put it out of your mind. I'll consult the gods instead."

Ip dip doo, the gods get to choose...

I moved my finger back and forth in my head, bouncing between Venezia on the left and Alexandria on the right. Ferdinand grabbed me before I could finish.

"Enough. Do *not* pray to the gods. Though there is nothing wrong with trying to stay cheerful, the names you come up with have the most unusual pronunciations. Proceed with caution, and submit a name only once you have shared with us its origin and your intentions."

My retainers nodded in agreement.

"Indeed. A duchy's name must not be chosen lightly. We should take some time to exchange ideas."

"Be considerate of the aubs who will succeed you."

Wait... Are my ideas going to be cast aside before I even realize what's happening?

I was having flashbacks to when my suggestions of Kensaku and Opac were rejected in favor of Adrett. That hadn't bothered me too much—I could always make more shumils and give them the names I wanted—but my city could only be named once. I wasn't about to surrender.

"What about Alexandria?" I asked.

“Did I not just tell you this was an emergency?” Ferdinand shot back. “There will be time for this discussion tonight. Wait until then. We will also need to discuss several other aspects of your plan, as an *entwickeln* cannot be performed without schematics. Now, make us a teleportation circle. We shall start by filling the duchy’s most ravaged provinces.”

There was nothing I could say to that. Deciding the name of my new city would need to wait—which was fine with me, as long as I got to plead my case. I chanted, “*Grutrisshheit*” to form my Book of Mestionora, then copied and placed a teleportation circle. It was ready in mere moments, eliciting awed murmurs from those around me.

Ferdinand approached me and asked in a whisper, “Were there ill effects of using the divine instruments?”

“There was a... *minor* problem,” I said. “But it shouldn’t be an issue by the time we’re done with the teleporter.”

“You fool.”

Once our belongings were ready to be teleported, our retainers and chefs stepped atop the circle. It made for a pretty sizable group.

For obvious reasons, it had fallen to me to prepare and pour mana into the teleportation circle. Ferdinand would need to activate it, though; Ahrensbach’s foundation thought he was the *aub*. He took out a somewhat large feystone before making his *schtappe*, indicating to those who didn’t know he had dyed me that he was acting as my representative and using my mana.

“*Nenluessel*. Bindewald.”

The spell drained more mana than I’d expected, though it was still a drop in the bucket compared to how much remained.

Expending Mana through Spring Prayer

“This place is like a ghost town...” I said.

Our past trips to Bindewald had been anything but peaceful: first a bunch of shrieking ladies, then feasts and ditter matches to entertain Dunkelfelger’s knights. Now it was barren land almost entirely devoid of greenery.

“As expected,” Ferdinand replied. “The estate was closed, and the servants moved to a neighboring city. It will remain this way until you assign a new giebe.”

I couldn’t do that until after the Archduke Conference, where the Zent would formally recognize me as the new Aub Ahrensbach. Well, I *could*, but people would view it as a massive slight against Eglantine. It was much safer to wait.

“Still...” I said. “If we don’t appoint someone soon, the commoners will suffer the consequences.” Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival needed to be performed and noble tax collectors had to be sent out or the commoners wouldn’t be able to pay their taxes. It wouldn’t be their fault, but they would face punishment nonetheless.

“I shall prepare several viable candidates for your review after the Archduke Conference. For now, form your highbeast and start moving the attendants and chefs.”

“Right.”

I made Rainbow Lessy and started to transform him, trying to picture the inside of a large camper. To ensure maximum comfort, I added as many beds as we had people.

“How’s this?” I asked when I was done, showing off my double-decker-bus-sized creation. “Now everyone can sleep peacefully.”

Ferdinand tapped his temple and made further demands. He wanted separate floors for the men and women, a separate space for the servants, higher ceilings, and more width than even the largest camper could provide. By the time I was done, Lessy looked more

like a house.

“Ferdinand, I don’t think this even counts as a (vehicle) anymore...”

Was this seriously still a highbeast? I was starting to wonder where people drew the line when Ferdinand gave a contented nod and said, “As abnormal as it looks, it should serve its purpose.”

“Abnormal”? Hah! The pot’s calling the kettle black!

“Begin preparing food and making the beds,” Ferdinand instructed the others. “If we need water, there is a well nearby. Rozemyne and I shall take our guards and start restoring the land.”

I put down feystones to ensure my highbeast wouldn’t disappear, then took the chalice and climbed onto Ferdinand’s white lion, leaving the chefs and attendants behind. We would spend the morning replenishing the northeastern towns around the summer estate, then work our way south after lunch.

“Let us hurry to the first farming town,” I said once we were airborne.

“Not yet,” Ferdinand replied, taking us past the one closest to us. “We should prioritize land away from the settlements.”

“But why? The towns come first, don’t they?” The best way to improve the harvest was to restore the land closest to the farmers. It didn’t make sense to do anything else.

“Not this time. If we focus on the farming towns, the mana will attract hordes of starving feybeasts. We should replenish the most rural areas first if we want to avoid casualties.”

“Ah,” I said, finally understanding him. The feybeasts were as famished as anyone. “In that case, let us hurry to the forests and mountains. My mana’s starting to spill out of the chalice.”

Ferdinand peered down to see, then immediately sped up.

As soon as we reached our destination, I poured some of the rainbow liquid out of my chalice. The earth below us darkened, and patches of green sprouted all around us as the land returned to its original appearance. My normal mana wouldn’t have been able to accomplish this—not without a prayer to the gods. It would only have enlarged the hungry feybeasts and feyplants.

Divine power sure is something else.

The changing scenery rendered me speechless. I wanted nothing more than to keep admiring it, but my arms soon started to tremble.

“Uh-oh. Ferdinand... My arms are tired from holding the chalice.”

“Endure it for a little while longer—until fourth bell.”

“I’ll do my best, but I might drop it.”

Dyeing an instrument with one’s mana made it feel almost weightless, but the chalice was still a nightmare to hold. It was surprisingly large—about eighty centimeters tall—and slowly sapped every ounce of my stamina.

Though I managed to hold out until fourth bell—thanks, in part, to Ferdinand—I wanted to scream that I’d reached my limit. My hands quivered, and my already weak grip strength was now practically nonexistent. Our trip had drained some of my mana and restored vast swathes of land, but we would absolutely need to rethink our approach.

We returned to Lessy for lunch. Hartmut had gotten back ahead of us and was regaling the attendants with an overly animated speech.

“It was extraordinary! The descent of a true goddess, without question! The divine avatar shone brighter than the sun, exuding the power of the gods, and quenched the barren earth with her omni-elemental mana. Geduldh wet the soil, Bluanfah visited with a profusion of sprouts, and Anwachs grew them with vig—”

“Hartmut, is this really the time?” Lieseleta interjected. “Lady Rozemyne needs to rest.”

“If you will excuse me, Hartmut...” Gretia said. “Though I am eager to know what my lady has been up to, serving her comes first.”

My attendants escaped with practiced ease, lightly chastising Hartmut before getting straight to work. Sergius wasn’t so fortunate; his eyes darted all over the place as he stumbled through a one-on-one conversation with the raving scholar.

“Ferdinand, should we save him?” I asked.

“Justus is approaching them now. We can leave the matter to him.”

Ferdinand was right—Justus was already marching to his fellow retainer’s rescue. He took the plates Sergius was carrying... and returned to us without a word.

“That wasn’t saving him...” I muttered. “That was leaving him to die.”

“An attendant’s priority is serving his lord.”

Right... Stay strong, Sergius.

Cheering him on in my heart, I turned to the plates Lieseleta had set in front of me. Steam billowed from the freshly made food.

Lieseleta leaned closer to me, inspecting my face. "You look tired, Lady Rozemyne."

"Carrying the chalice was exhausting. Could we fasten it to my stomach before I set out again? Then I should need only to rest my hands against it."

"Fasten it... to your stomach?" Lieseleta paused—she must have been imagining it—then gave Ferdinand a queer look. I continued to explain before he could shoot me down.

"It won't look elegant, but what other choice do we have? I'm physically incapable of using it gracefully."

"Yes, this morning made that clear..." Ferdinand mused. "How fares your mana? Replenishing the land must have worked wonders for you if you are proposing something so crude."

Was I the only one who didn't care about elegance? This was supposed to be an emergency—that was why we'd put naming my new city on the back burner.

"Less abundant than before," I replied. "If we keep up our current pace and account for how much mana I regain each night, I should run out in... five days."

"Five days... Have you forgotten that a single morning completely drained your stamina?"

"Accounting for that is your job, not mine."

Ferdinand could glare for as long as he wanted. He was my head doctor, and it was his belief that replenishing the duchy was the best way to drain my mana. I was just following orders.

"In other words, we need a less tiring method..."

Ferdinand pondered while he ate, searching for another solution. He must not have found one, though, as I spent that afternoon with the chalice tied to my stomach, restoring the land as we had done that morning.

"I'm so tired..." I groaned.

Over the course of the afternoon, I'd poured mana into the rest of Bindewald and the province of Kannawitz to the south. Now I was slumped over the white lion taking us back to my Pandahouse, too exhausted to even sit up. I would probably have fallen by now if not for Ferdinand acting as my backrest.

"It is your own fault for getting so excited about Kannawitz," he

replied. "You expended stamina for no good reason."

"My fault? How was I meant to stay calm when the province has such a vast ocean?"

"You have seen the ocean countless times since coming to Ahrensbach."

"From the castle, sure, but never up close. And thanks to my divine power, the once murky waters turned clear blue and sparkling. Fish leapt out of the brine! It doesn't even compare to anything I've seen before."

The fishermen at sea had rejoiced and waved at us from their boats. I'd returned the gesture and given the province even more mana as a show of my appreciation. Ferdinand was right that I'd neglected to preserve my stamina, but why couldn't I celebrate the birth of my fish paradise?

We returned to Rainbow Lessy and got ready for dinner. The retainers who had accompanied us gave Ella and Hugo our spoils: fresh fish we'd purchased from the fishermen. I planned to stash the ingredients in a time-stopping tool and enjoy them on the road.

"Here you are, Lady Rozemyne. And this is for you, Lord Ferdinand."

As archducal family members, Ferdinand and I ate first. Once we were done, some of our knights would take their meals in another room while our other retainers continued to serve and guard, awaiting their turn. I tried to eat quickly so as not to delay them.

My hastily devoured meal soon turned into after-dinner tea, which I sipped while waiting for my retainers to finish eating. Eckhart and Laurenz were the first to rejoin us. The attendants refreshed our drinks one last time before leaving to have some food.

Lounging on one of my Pandahouse's sofas, I took another drink of tea. I waited for Ferdinand to do the same before launching my attack.

"Now, let us discuss my library city."

"Did you not just claim to be exhausted?" Ferdinand retorted.

"We should avoid any subjects that might tire you further."

"The salted fish Ella hurried to prepare has revitalized me. Besides, did you not promise we would discuss this tonight? I've been looking forward to it all day."

Ferdinand touched my forehead and wrists to inspect my health, then begrudgingly sat back down and produced sound-

blockers. “Your ideas were Venezia and Alexandria, correct? Both have relatively normal pronunciations for someone with your naming sense. Where did they come from? Your world of dreams, I assume?”

“‘Relatively’? That’s a rude way to put it.”

“As I recall, when we were deciding on your noble name, not a single one of your suggestions made sense.”

I averted my eyes out of spite. In preparation for my noble persona, I’d proposed several names that I could use instead of “Myne.” I’d put so much thought into them, trying to come up with something that encapsulated my reappearing stronger than ever before, only for Ferdinand to tell me they were all unusable. The conversation stood out clearly in my mind...

But not the circumstances surrounding it.

There must be more to this. In fact, what drove me to become a noble in the first place?

Delia, Dirk, Count Bindewald, Bezewanst—faces from the temple arose in my mind. I remembered someone protecting me but not the first thing about them. The gaps in my memory caused an uncomfortable tickle in my chest.

Why did I join the temple? Oh, right. To read the bible and gain access to the book room.

Even my recollection of the events leading up to my entering the temple was full of gaps. At most, I remembered desperately seeking books after being reborn into a world without any.

“Rozemyne?”

Ferdinand’s voice brought me back to my senses. I could dig through my memories later. It probably wasn’t smart to think about something so anxiety-inducing while I was still under the influence of divine mana.

“The names,” I said. “Right. Alexandria was an ancient city. It had its own massive library replete with gardens and gathered reading material from all around the world. You could say it was exactly what I aim to achieve. Venezia, meanwhile, was a merchant city that had more bookstores than anywhere else once Gutenberg helped proliferate the printing industry. I want my new duchy to have just as many books, with trade bringing in more by the day.”

Ferdinand thought for a moment, then said with some trepidation, “I would not recommend Venezia. It sounds too much like a word used in Lanzenave. Even if we claimed it was taken

from another language in the world of the gods, it would surely be misunderstood in ways that would trouble us.”

“Well, I can’t argue with that logic.” I supposed that the English name, “Venice,” was also an option, but it didn’t sit right with me on a mystical aesthetic level. “Are we going with Alexandria, then?”

“Alexandria... Hmm... I would rather the name indicate some manner of connection to Ehrenfest, to make it easily apparent that an Ehrenfest archduke candidate claimed the foundation.”

My first thought was “Ehrendria,” but I quickly dismissed it. The name sounded more like a strange food product than anything else.

Consider that a lesson for you, Rozemyne! Don’t arbitrarily combine two words!

“I must insist on Alexandria,” I said. “The original city had gardens full of rare specimens, an abundance of research documents, and received travelers from all over. It perfectly suits a duchy being built around your lab, my library, and the Gutenbergs’ printing.”

Ferdinand sighed, having seen right through my desperate scramble to justify the name. “You sought my opinion yet appear to have already reached a verdict. Very well. You claimed the duchy to begin with, so I shall accept whatever name you desire—assuming it is not outrageously offensive.”

“I thank you ever so much. Let us start planning the construction of Alexandria.”

A slight frown creased Ferdinand’s brow. “You seem more attached to your previous world than usual...”

“Because of my lost memories, I’d assume. The most I remember about my days as a commoner are dipping my toes in merchantry and spending time in the temple. My thoughts of the past are mostly from when I was Urano and reading was more important to me than absolutely anything else.”

My days as Myne were a blur, but my memories since becoming Rozemyne seemed mostly untouched. If, as Ferdinand claimed, Mestionora had severed my memories of everyone and everything I cared about more than books, then I must have treasured a lot from when I was a commoner. My hairpin craftsperson and dyer were apparently included, but what did that mean? Who had they been to me?

“Well, it isn’t impacting my day-to-day life, at least.”

Ferdinand shook his head. "There have been many occasions today when you have said or done things I would never have expected from you, likely because your core memories have been removed. This is sure to cause problems in the future."

I was compelled to ask for examples but couldn't get the words out. The last thing I wanted was for Ferdinand to turn around and start rejecting me. Instead, I smiled and changed the subject.

"There's no point dwelling on it now, is there? We can't make any headway on my lost memories until we've rid me of this divine power. On a more important note, what should the new duchy's color be? In the past, it matched the divine color of the country gate, so maybe we should go with something close to black." Pure black was still associated with the royals, so it would probably be best to avoid that.

Ferdinand eyed me carefully. "If we plan to take that approach, we should advise the Sovereignty to change its color to white in accordance with its move to the Royal Academy. Zents historically wore white, in case you were unaware."

"If we announce that, we'll need to wear white ourselves." It had once been the norm for Zent candidates to dress in white after obtaining their Books of Mestionora so that Ewigeliebe wouldn't attack them. Zents and aubs had worn the same color, which explained why High Bishop robes were also white.

Again, Ferdinand shook his head. "If we adhere fully to the old ways, then that rule will apply only to you. Lady Eglantine did not obtain her Book of Mestionora, and mine is being kept hidden from the public."

"I see... I'd much rather it apply to the whole Sovereignty." If nobody else in Yurgenschmidt wore white, I would feel like an outcast. I just wanted to set up my library city and then read with all my friends.

"If you would rather your duchy's color be only close to black, then why not use the color of your hair?" Ferdinand asked. "You have the same dusky locks as Mestionora, whose flowing tresses had the blessing of the God of Darkness. I can think of no better color for her avatar." He reached out and stroked my hair as though it were the most natural thing in the world, then regretfully added, "But alas, no longer would the hue stand out against your clothes."

Wait... Has he always been the kind of person to just reach out and touch someone's hair?

“Is something the matter, Rozemyne?”

“No, nothing. If my hair and clothes blend together, that’s fine with me. In a world where all nobles must wear their duchy’s color, such problems are inevitable.” Truth be told, I couldn’t have been less invested.

Ferdinand didn’t respond. He brushed a few errant strands out of my eyes.

“As for the crest,” I continued, “I wish to use Lessy.”

Ferdinand pulled away at once, his arm recoiling like a snake. “Absolutely not. Future generations of Aub Alexandria will need to use your crest; I shall not doom them to bear gruns on their chests for the sake of your strange tastes. If you would rather not tie your duchy to Ehrenfest through its name, then at least inherit its lions. Or use shumils in honor of those library magic tools.”

I’d thought a red panda would suit my duchy better than anything else, but Ferdinand disagreed. He’d rejected the idea so forcefully—and moved so quickly on to proposing alternatives—that I already knew he wasn’t going to budge on the matter.

“You told me before that shumils are too weak to be used in a duchy’s crest.”

“Yes, the ones found in the wild. The magic tools, on the other hand, are exceptionally strong. You need only add feystones to their foreheads to make the distinction clear.”

Given his firm stance before, I’d never expected such an abrupt one-eighty. “Do you really hate Lessy that much?!”

“You are not the only one who would need to wear that wretched grun. If you are insistent, ask the opinion of any of your retainers. Not one of them will support you.”

I put the sound-blocker aside and turned to Laurenz and Eckhart, who were standing nearby as our guards. Lieseleta and some of the others who had finished eating came over to see what I wanted.

“Attention, everyone!” I called out. “Between my Pandabus and the library’s shumils, what would you rather see on Alexandria’s crest?”

They all exchanged looks, then answered in unison: “The library’s shumils.”

“The idea sounds delightful,” Lieseleta added.

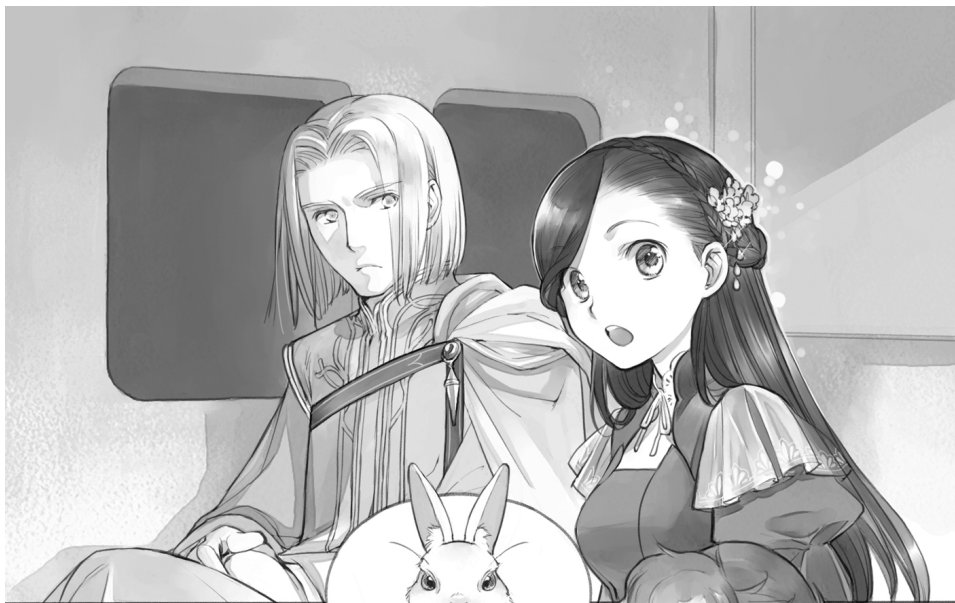
“Perhaps, but Ferdinand once said that a crest should show its duchy’s strength,” I retorted.

Gretia smiled. "According to Judithe, the scythe-wielding magic tool was remarkably strong. Perhaps we could add a scythe to the crest."

Please, no!

"I would much rather give them books!" I cried.

"An excellent idea, Lady Rozemyne," Laurenz said, clapping his hands together with a bright smile. "That sounds like the perfect crest for your library city!"



“Shumils and a book...” Gretia mused. “Given the circumstances, should we have the latter be the Grutrissheit?”

“It’s too detailed and would only cause problems down the line,” Eckhart replied, dismissing the proposal at once.

“Yeah,” Laurenz added. “A duchy not run by the Zent using the Grutrissheit in its crest seems a little...”

Lieseleta rested a hand on her cheek. “Could we take inspiration from the crest of the Rozemyne Workshop? Books, ink, and plants—incorporating those themes might be wise.”

“A most commendable idea,” Ferdinand said with a nod.

As I stared at them all in confusion, Ferdinand and my retainers made brisk progress on formalizing the crest. They weren’t even considering my Pandabus anymore. “Would using Lessy really be that bad...?” I asked, but it was already too late; not one of them even acknowledged my question.

Never-Ending Mana

An overwhelming wave of despair washed over me. Though I'd spent the previous day working as hard as I could, trying desperately to drain my mana, a single night's sleep had put me right back where I'd started. It was like completing a magnificent sandcastle, only to have the tide come in and wash it all away. This was worse, of course; having more mana in my body meant torturous pain and a very real chance of death.

Guhhh... My head feels so fuzzy.

Two days spent working my fingers to the bone and yesterday's excitement about the ocean had finally caught up with me. My body felt heavier than ever, but going back to sleep would only cause my mana to regenerate even more. I needed to stay awake and think of ways to use it.

I trudged to the dining hall for breakfast and saw that Ferdinand was eating already. As much as I'd tried to make my Pandahouse enormous, there was still only enough space for Ferdinand and me to have our own bedrooms and small areas to change clothes; we shared the same space at mealtimes.

I sat down and started working through my breakfast: vegetables served with fruit juice. Unable to use rejuvenation potions, meals were the best way for me to restore my stamina. That didn't make the food any easier to eat, though.

Ferdinand ate the last of his breakfast, then rose from his seat and moved to stand next to me. "I can tell at a glance that you are feeling unwell. How bad is it?"

"The fish betrayed me..."

"Fool. Your celebrations in Kannawitz gave you a fever, and now you cannot stop shaking. Express that clearly next time." He touched my forehead and nape, his icy hands soothing my temperature. "To think my idea failed this abruptly... How should we proceed, I wonder?"

"My apologies... I can make it through this morning, at least..."

"You would go outside in your current state? Or, what, do you

intend to use a rejuvenation potion?"

I shook my head, enduring his stern glare. The very act of sleeping recovered enough of my mana to make me despair. Drinking a rejuvenation potion in my current state would make the task ahead of us so hopeless that I would probably crumple to the ground and sob in front of everyone.

"I meant to say that I could travel via Lessy."

"And where would you go? You need to use up the rest of your mana—what good would your highbeast do?"

I desperately racked my brain. There had to be a way for me to expend my mana without wasting all my stamina. And then it hit me. How had we always dealt with problems we couldn't solve on our own? We got someone else to do them!

"I poured my mana into the other divine instruments, right? Anyone can use them as long as they know the prayers. We could get the others to drain the instruments for me; then I could simply refill them."

"The divine instruments?" Ferdinand asked, raising an eyebrow.

I nodded. "Though I would rather not burden them, they could restore the land with Flutrane's staff, slay feybeasts with Leidenschaft's spear, keep Lessy safe with Schutzaria's shield, and perform Spring Prayer in Bindewald—where there is no giebe—with Geduldh's chalice. I would need only to refill their instruments each time they ran dry. Can you think of anywhere devoid of mana but still teeming with feybeasts?"

I needed to recover my stamina but couldn't risk my mana rising even further. My idea sounded perfect—if all went to plan, I could expel my divine power from the comfort of my bed.

"Additionally..." I continued, "Hartmut and you can draw the healing magic circle used in the Academy's gathering spots, right? Could you stick them all over the place so I can pour my mana into them? Maybe I could rest this morning and then focus on the circles after lunch."

"You place too much faith in your stamina..." Ferdinand muttered. "Still, I admit—your plan should work better than what we attempted yesterday. It does not bode well that you are coming up with so many solutions..."

"What do you mean?"

His eyebrows drawn together, Ferdinand took one of the potions from his belt. It was long and slender like a test tube. He

poured a drop of the red substance inside into one of the spoons on the table. "I would prefer not to elaborate. It was a troublesome habit of yours—one I would rather you not relearn. More importantly..."

Ferdinand gave me the spoon, uttering not another word. I slowly brought it to my lips. It was only a single droplet, but an intense bitterness spread through my mouth, and my tongue sparked in protest. I couldn't help feeling sorry for anyone who had the misfortune of drinking the whole vial.

"This is awful..." I groaned. "What does it do? Restore mana? At least warn me before you try burning a hole through my tongue. I wasn't ready at all."

Ferdinand gave an even deeper frown as though he'd tasted the potion with me. "You should hardly have noticed a drop that small. Hartmut, where are the other divine instruments? Did you return them to the temple?"

Hartmut stuck out his chest, brimming with pride. "They are so crucial to Lady Rozemyne's ceremonies that I decided to bring them with me."

Impressive! That's a win for Hartmut!

Cornelius shook his head, seemingly exasperated. "I was told you *did* return them, then rushed to retrieve them before we departed the temple."

"Is that so? Do you really think I would entrust divine instruments containing Lady Rozemyne's divine power to others?"

Just like that, the two retainers were glowering at each other. I dared not think what might happen to anyone who strayed into the cross fire.

"Enough. The details are irrelevant," Ferdinand interjected, waving the pair away. "Rozemyne, do you truly expect this to work?"

"The instruments took a good chunk of my mana before, and we shouldn't need to worry about them breaking. I can't think of any other way I could rest while still getting rid of my divine power."

"I see..." Ferdinand nodded, then gave his temple a few contemplative taps, as he always did when organizing his thoughts. "Very well. We shall attempt your plan after breakfast. Once your retainers have eaten, they shall restore the land, hunt feybeasts, and perform Spring Prayer. I, meanwhile, will teleport to the castle;

there are several matters I must take care of. Activate the teleportation circle for me, then rest until this afternoon, when we shall travel to Seitzen's west side or Vulkatag. There, we shall replenish the earth and slay feybeasts."

Having said his piece, Ferdinand turned on his heel and exited the dining hall. Justus dumped the plates he had started gathering into Sergius's arms and followed. I tried to get up as well, but Lieseleta put her hands on my shoulders and urged me back into my seat.

"Lady Rozemyne, you have not finished your breakfast."

I ate the rest of my vegetables under my attendant's watchful gaze, then copied and pasted a teleportation circle from my Book of Mestionora. Ferdinand approached it with Justus, Eckhart, and several other knights. He was leaving Sergius behind to prepare lunch and carry out other duties and a few of the other guards to protect Lessy and my retinue.

"Lady Rozemyne, what should we do?" my retainers asked.

"Angelica, I want you to guard my room," I said. "You have keen eyes, so I trust no one will get past you. Leonore, stand outside with Schutzaria's shield and protect Lessy. Everyone else may choose between hunting feybeasts or guarding Hartmut while he carries out Spring Prayer."

"I would advise Matthias and Cornelius to hunt feybeasts while Laurenz and Clarissa accompany me," Hartmut replied.

"Would it not be better for Clarissa to hunt feybeasts?" I asked, my eyes wandering to the woman in question. It didn't seem right to drag someone from Dunkelfelger into one of my new duchy's religious ceremonies.

She shook her head. "If you would allow me, I would much rather stay with Hartmut. Now that Yurgenschmidt has a Zent with the Grutrissheit, the country's perspective on religious ceremonies has changed, whether the nobles like it or not. We must continue to promote the ceremonies' importance—and what better way than for me, your loyal vassal, to participate? I even memorized the prayers!"

Partway through her speech, Clarissa had spared a brief glance at Ahrensbach's knights. Though she hadn't uttered a single falsehood, I could tell she was laying it on thick for those still resisting the temple and its ceremonies.

She continued, "Even those in Dunkelfelger are performing

religious ceremonies outside the Royal Academy. Spring Prayer won't require us to enter any temples, so my involvement shouldn't pose an issue." Temples were still a sore spot for many duchies, but only because we hadn't yet revealed the true nature of the bibles' keys and the foundations. Once we did, the country's aubs and their families would rush to start visiting them.

There's no harm in letting her participate. She's so excited that she already memorized all the prayers...

Beneath her outlandish and somewhat confusing veneer, Clarissa was a very competent scholar. I didn't want to admit it, but she was an excellent partner for Hartmut.

"Matthias and Cornelius are on feybeast duty...?" Angelica muttered, eyeing the pair enviously. She was so physically active that I suspected she would rather have gone hunting than stay home as a guard.

"It won't be feybeast hunting as you know it," I said. "Their main objective is using the divine instruments to drain them of mana. I do not believe it would suit you."

To use the divine instruments, my knights would need to pray. That wasn't true in all cases—if you took an instrument when it was empty and managed to fill it, then praying became unnecessary—but the instruments here already contained my mana. Using a simpler version of the prayer was an option if you formed the instrument from your schtappe or used a feystone completely dyed with your mana, but again, that wasn't an option. Those tasked with slaying feybeasts would need to recite the entire prayer without errors. It had to be precisely memorized, as it was normally used when multiple blue priests and shrine maidens dedicated their mana.

"That said, if you are that eager to join them..." I gave Angelica a serious look. "Memorize the ceremony's prayers. Only then will you have permission to go hunting."

"Prayers... Never mind. You were right, Lady Rozemyne. I shall protect your room with my life."

As expected. If she'd actually agreed, I wouldn't have known what to think.

While my knights checked and practiced the prayers necessary for the divine instruments, I asked Strahl to divide the Ahrensbach knights into squads. They were tasked with protecting the feybeast hunters, those performing Spring Prayer, and my Pandahouse.

“Farewell, Lady Rozemyne. Do get some rest.”

My retainers took their leave, carrying the divine instruments Hartmut had given them.

Fourth bell rang while I was lounging in bed. My fever had gone down a bit, but my rejuvenating mana had caused the divine power within me to swell, leaving me drowsy and a little queasy. It was bearable, but my fingers and toes were stinging.

Guh... I'm starting to hate being in bed.

I was feeling lethargic, but I got up nonetheless. Lieseleta peered down at me with concern, then informed me that everyone had come back for lunch.

“The divine instruments have been emptied,” she said. “Should we bring them to you first...?”

“If you would.”

Lieseleta and Clarissa brought in the instruments, allowing me to fill them one by one. My mana quantity had returned to the same level as before I'd slept, which relieved me so greatly that I openly sighed.

“You look much better now,” Lieseleta said. “Gretia has prepared some lunch if you are hungry. I would rather not bring it here, as you would need to eat in bed, but... we were asked to save as much time as we can.”

“Ferdinand must be back, then.”

There was only one person who would give an order like that. If we ate in the dining hall, our retainers wouldn't be able to eat until we were done. But if we ate somewhere secluded—our rooms, for example—they could all eat at once. It was a clever trick but also painfully inelegant, so it had to be used in moderation.

Lieseleta took her leave, and Gretia entered with several dishes on a tray. They were arranged so that I could eat in bed.

“From what Justus told me, Lord Ferdinand was exceptionally busy this morning,” Gretia said, noting his labors in the castle and that he had returned with many of his work implements. “He contacted the giebels of Seitzen and Vulkatag, sent an update to Ehrenfest, and spoke with Zent Eglantine. According to a report from Giebe Vulkatag, there is a horde of ravenous feybeasts approaching Alexandria from the direction of Old Werkestock. He believes they have come seeking mana now that the land is being filled with divine power.”

I was reminded of how restoring the Academy's gathering spots had attracted strong feybeasts hunting for mana. "And these ravenous feybeasts are most likely to target me, I assume." My body contained an abundance of divine mana; from the feybeasts' perspective, I must have been a feast like no other.

"The plan is to head straight to the border between Seitzen and Vulkatag to prevent the land you replenished from being drained again. In the meantime, you will remain under heavy guard."

Seitzen was south of Griebel and Garduhn, the latter of which connected to the Ehrenfest-Ahrensbach border gate. Vulkatag was west of Seitzen and shared its northern border with Illgner and Griebel, the same border where Bonifatius had done battle while my team fought in Gerlach. Moving to protect the area from feybeasts would, in turn, protect Ehrenfest.

"Illgner and Griebel are still recovering from the war," Gretia continued. "For their sake and ours, we should draw the feybeasts into Alexandria before hunting them down."

My thoughts turned to Illgner, a rural province with a small population. Brigitte had joined the early stages of the war as the giebe's younger sister and sent important warnings to the capital. I wanted to ease their burden as much as I could.

Not to mention, Vulkatag must have plenty of the same feyplants.

Vulkatag was connected to the same mountain range that included Mount Lohenberg, where I'd acquired the riesefalke eggs for my jureve. It was rich with Fire mana and dense forests, making it the perfect place to establish Alexandria's paper-making business.

Though I doubt the nobles living there think too highly of Ferdinand and me. They sided with Georgine and agreed to invade Ehrenfest.

"Let's hope we can earn the giebess' favor by restoring their land and slaying the feybeasts..." I said. "For the printing industry's sake, we'll need it."

"Lord Ferdinand proposed using Leidenschaft's spear several times in quick succession, though he said not to overdo it; the divinely charged instrument will ravage the land unless you use Flutrane's staff promptly afterward. That warning aside, he described this as the perfect opportunity for you to drain your mana."

I certainly hope so.

As it stood, replenishing the divine instruments was just enough to rid me of the mana that came back while I slept. I doubted that

slaying a few feybeasts was going to do much for me, but I swallowed those feelings and did my best to smile. No way was I going to complain when Gretia was doing her best to cheer me up.

“It is time,” Ferdinand announced. “Let us move to the border between Seitzen and Vulkatag. Both giebess know of our intentions, of course; we could never hunt their feybeasts and pour mana into their land without telling them.”

Divine power was cataclysmic in strength. In mere moments, it had changed the appearance of an entire ocean. We couldn’t overstate its impact on barren earth, so it stood to reason that we’d contacted the giebess.

If only the task ahead were as simple as just replenishing the earth.

No sooner had Ferdinand given his explanation than he set out with his knights. I drove my Pandahouse behind them.

“The area has been secured,” came Leonore’s voice. I opened the passenger door for her, and she climbed into my highbeast. She grabbed the divine shield sitting on the back seat, then prepared to leave at Angelica’s signal.

“How does it look out there?” I asked.

“The feybeasts just keep coming—not that I am surprised. It will not be long before we need to use this shield. That said...” Leonore paused, then burst into laughter. “The farmers below were most amusing. They clamored and pointed up at your highbeast. Some rushed out of their homes and even started chasing after us.”

Rainbow Lessy didn’t look the slightest bit like a regular highbeast. He was enormous—the equivalent of a two-story house soaring through the sky. It must have been one of the strangest things the commoners had ever witnessed.

“The whole rainbow thing really stands out, huh?” I mused.

“I don’t think the color is the problem...”

It was then that Angelica shouted, “Feybeasts!” from outside. I opened the door of my Pandahouse without a second thought. Leonore climbed out, chanting the prayer for Schutzaria’s shield, and Angelica took her place.

“There are many strong feybeasts here,” she sharply informed me. “Someone said the lack of mana must have driven them to start eating each other.”

I nodded and brought Lessy to a stop in midair. My instructions were to stay still until the fighting was over. My divine mana really

must have made me the perfect feast because several strong feybeasts started their attack. The sight would normally have made me cry out in fear, but on this occasion, I actually wanted them to come close to me.

“We’re going to get so much use out of our divine instruments,” I said.

Leonore was using Schutzaria’s shield to prevent the feybeasts from getting too close while Matthias and Cornelius took turns blasting them with Leidenschaft’s spear. As each one fell, Flutrane’s staff was used to heal the massive craters in the earth. My mana-packed instruments were doing a ton of work.

For once, I’m glad the spear ends up drained of mana after a single use. Thank you, Leidenschaft!

“Lady Rozemyne, we humbly request that you refill these for us,” my knights said, returning to Lessy once the instruments were all empty.

We weren’t moving very fast—every time we slew some of the feybeasts, we had to stop and wait until the land was healed—but that didn’t bother me. I welcomed anything that would ease the pain of the divine mana swirling within me. We’d actually managed to drain even more than I’d expected.

At least now I’ll get to rest comfortably tonight.

We continued to hunt feybeasts while we traveled, then stopped at the border between Seitzen and Vulkatag. Ferdinand immediately instructed Leonore to form Schutzaria’s shield.

“O Goddess of Wind Schutzaria, protector of all. O twelve goddesses who serve by her side...”

The shield soon appeared around us, announcing the start of our break. I moved out of the driver’s seat and entered the massive house behind me. From the outside, Lessy looked more like a huge tortoise with a red panda’s head attached.

This really isn’t cute. It’s comfortable, though.

I went to the first-floor living room, which was next to the dining hall, and saw Ferdinand giving instructions for what to do next. “Rozemyne, how are you faring?” he asked when he noticed me.

“My nap this morning left me very refreshed, and pouring so much mana into the divine instruments has done me a world of good. I’ve even regained my appetite.”

“I see you are feeling a little better,” Lieseleta said with a

chuckle. "I was worried when you barely touched breakfast or lunch, but I shall see to it that you receive an especially large dinner." She spun on her heel and went to speak with the chefs.

"Lady Rozemyne, if you would," Gretia said, indicating the nearby sofa.

Once I was seated, Ferdinand approached and started another inspection. "You seem better than you were this morning," he said, "though I can hardly describe you as being in good health."

I was feeling a lot less poorly now that my mana wasn't leaving me in agony. The pleasant chill of my head doctor's hands reminded me that my fever hadn't completely vanished, but still.

"I am not unwell enough to warrant that frown, Ferdinand. My appetite has returned; what more could we ask for?"

"Do not overeat now that your hunger has returned," he dryly warned, wearing the plain expression of a doctor and tapping his temple. He probably thought I was being unladylike again or that I shouldn't judge my health based on my hunger. I wasn't able to find out which because he then got up and took his leave.

"Your rudeness aside... I won't."

As it turned out, my risk of overeating was even more nonexistent than I'd expected. Though I wanted to eat, my body outright rejected whatever I tried to feed it. I ended up eating only the bare minimum.

So I still can't eat even now that my appetite's back? This sucks!

My retainers still needed to eat, so I went to the living room for some after-dinner tea. Ferdinand stopped me before I could even sit down.

"As I said, your health is anything but good. You should rest, not waste your time drinking tea. I would advise you to spend tomorrow using the chalice to drain your mana."

"Do I really have to rest?" I asked. "I'd rather spend some more time discussing my library city. I was told you brought schematics and was looking forward to going through them..."

Despite my best attempts to change his mind, Ferdinand shut me down. "Return to your room for now. You are in a worse state than you realize. As you cannot drink potions, rest is your only way to get better."

I don't wanna sleep. By the time I wake up, my mana's going to be back where it started.

Irritated at my never-ending mana reserves, I conceded and

returned to my room. I clutched my empty stomach as I climbed into bed.

Large-Scale Magic

“Wait, don’t go...!”

I woke up in the dead of night to the sound of my own voice. There was sweat running down my back, and my pillow was wet with tears. The most awful dream had jolted me awake... and worst of all, I couldn’t even remember what it was about.

I saw something... But what? And who was I chasing?

A grimace revealed my frustration. I’d come so close to recalling one of my lost memories, but not close enough. Leonore, who was on night watch, must have heard me wake because she soon peered through the bed-curtain.

“You do not look well, Lady Rozemyne. Would you like me to fetch the divine instruments? Lieseleta informed me that filling them with mana helped you feel somewhat better before, so we have them drained and ready for you.”

After dinner, my knights had gone out of their way to hunt more feybeasts so they could empty the divine instruments for me. I was touched by their consideration and asked that the instruments be brought over.

I’m hungry. I woke up feeling awful. My body feels so heavy. My mana’s come back...

I clutched my head and sat at the edge of my bed, channeling mana into the divine instruments Leonore brought me. That was when Gretia entered, dressed in simple clothes with her hair loosely bound. In my current state, only my name-sworn could touch me when I wasn’t wearing silver cloth, which put a huge burden on Gretia when it came to attendant work like bathing me or changing my clothes. Leonore had probably woken her up with an ordonnanz.

“I am sorry to have woken you, Gretia,” I said.

“You need not apologize. I was able to rest during the day. You appear to be drenched with sweat. Would you care for a bath?”

“Just a waschen for now. You may use one of my feystones.”

I gestured to some of the many feystones packed with my mana

that I was keeping in my room. Gretia took one and cleansed me as instructed.

Once again, I channeled mana into the divine instruments as Leonore held them out for me. Schutzaria's shield was last, but a strange sensation overcame me as I was filling it. I gazed around, keeping my hand on the shield.

"Is something wrong, Lady Rozemyne?"

"I sense something below us... Coming from the living room or dining hall, maybe. It feels like when Gervasio appeared from the tunnel behind the altar. This doesn't mean he broke into Lessy, does it? I don't remember hearing what happened to him..."

As I tried to pinpoint the source of the strange sensation, Leonore nodded as if she understood what was going on. She gave me a curious look, then giggled. "We are inside your highbeast, Lady Rozemyne; I doubt anyone could get inside without your permission. You are most likely detecting Lord Ferdinand, who is working in the living room. If you are still curious, would you like to check? Unless you are feeling unwell after providing so much mana, it might be wise."

From there, Leonore turned to her side. "Gretia. My apologies, but could you change Lady Rozemyne's clothes? Something loose-fitting that she can wear to bed. She will go back to resting when we return, and you may return to your room."

"My thanks."

Gretia changed my clothes and dressed me in my silver cloak. She had also put my hair up, though not too tightly.

Leonore and I were already en route to the living room when Angelica rushed over, apologized that she was late, and snatched me up off the ground. "Please await my arrival next time," she said, her eyes sharp. "You have been ordered not to walk anywhere."

I chuckled and simply let her continue to carry me.

Light bled out of the first-floor living room. We were just about to go inside when Eckhart stuck his head out and said, "Lord Ferdinand permits you to enter."

"He knew I was coming?" I asked.

"Who else radiates divine power as she walks about?"

Hold on... Is divine power kind of like a cat bell...?

I went into the living room and saw that the space meant for post-meal tea had more or less been converted into an office. The private bedrooms I'd made were only large enough for a bed and

somewhere to change one's clothes, so Ferdinand had brought his work from the castle here.

"So? Were you unable to sleep?" he pressed.

"An unpleasant dream woke me, though I don't remember the details. Then I channeled mana into a divine instrument and sensed something in this general area... It was like when Gervasio appeared atop the altar; I could feel someone, but their identity was obscured."

"It would seem she sensed *you* this time, Lord Ferdinand."

"Oh...?" Ferdinand gestured to the space beside him on the sofa, and at once, Angelica deposited me onto the empty seat. I was a little unsettled, maybe because I was feeling something I'd never felt before.

"Ferdinand, what happened to Gervasio?" I asked.

"Zent Eglantine's knights managed to capture him. His memories were read, and his official punishment will likely be announced during the Archduke Conference."

"So everyone's safe and sound..." I sighed in relief. "That's good to hear. I wouldn't have known what to do if he'd somehow escaped."

"Everyone"? No, not at all. Zent Eglantine and Lord Consort Anastasius each lost half of their guard in the process."

"What?! How?!"

Ferdinand pulled several sheets of paper from the stack before him, seeming disinterested. "That is for the new Zent and her husband to consider. Should your focus not be on Alexandria?"

On closer inspection, the papers in his hand were the schematics for my new library city. All thoughts of Gervasio zipped out of my mind.

"Though I wish to incorporate as many elements of your ideal city as I can," Ferdinand said, "you were much too focused on its library."

"Well, of course. It's the most important part of my city. Its beating heart, if you will. What else would we focus on?" Any city I constructed would need to have a giant library at its very center.

Ferdinand grimaced. "You plan to visit your library on a regular basis, I imagine. To minimize the danger of you moving between it and the castle, I would advise keeping the two close—both within the Noble's Quarter, to be precise. The laboratory will remain there as well. One thing I will not permit, however, is your desire to

connect the castle and the library with teleporters. I shall arrange for you to have separate sleeping quarters in the latter. That is all.”

Teleporters would make traveling between the castle and the library a breeze, but their omission didn’t surprise me; the kind meant for transporting humans could only be used with the aub’s permission. If, for whatever reason, I elected to use it alone, my knights would need to race all the way to its twin to reunite with me. And of course, they would face punishment for losing sight of their charge.

“Personal-use teleporters are out of the question,” Ferdinand concluded. “Instead, I would propose another approach.”

Back in Ehrenfest, the higher one’s status, the farther north one lived in the Noble’s Quarter. Alexandria would tweak this system by having the highest-ranked nobles live closest to the city center, ensuring their houses were as close to the library as one could get. Ferdinand went on to explain that by separating the library from the castle’s book room, we could make it more accessible for baptized children and apprentices.

“Really? But what you just proposed only benefits nobles...” I said.

“The library is too close to the castle for us not to impose restrictions—especially when you, the aub, intend to use it so frequently. For security reasons, we cannot allow too many vagrants to enter.”

“I get that, but... this is *my* duchy. Here in Alexandria, shouldn’t everyone have access to books?”

“Considering the current literacy rate among commoners, I think you are getting ahead of yourself. What you are proposing is a long-term goal. Even if we were to enforce it from the start, the pushback from the nobility would be immense.”

That might have been true, but he was straying too far from my vision. This was too important for me to compromise. I opened my mouth to protest, but Ferdinand raised a hand to stop me.

“Let me finish. Alexandria will come to be known as the duchy of a divine avatar. If we consider the entire city—the commoners included—then it would make more sense to put the temple first, not your library. And as we are creating everything from scratch, we can incorporate the strengths of Ehrenfest’s temple.”

According to Ferdinand, we would build the temple between the Noble’s Quarter and the lower city so that nobles *and*

commoners could go there. It would contain workshops, an orphanage, and a place for blue priests to live, as well as a shrine for rituals and praying to the gods.

“Moreover,” he continued, “by allowing the wealthier commoners to attend the temple classrooms you once proposed, we can transform the temple into a library of sorts that even commoners can visit. The literacy rate in the lower city will improve, the commoners will learn how to treat books, and only then will we allow them in the main library near the castle. Keeping the masses on our side is crucial. If we are too heavy-handed, we will only inspire resistance to what we hope to achieve.”

To prevent our books from being stolen, we would implement the same deposit system as the Royal Academy’s library. Those who couldn’t pay wouldn’t be able to borrow. Ferdinand expected my library to be members-only for the first stretch of our journey.

So we need to pace ourselves.

I shouldn’t have been surprised; developments on this scale had taken hundreds of years back on Earth. As much as I wanted to skip ahead whole generations, our options were limited until printing became more widespread and the cost of books plummeted. Ferdinand was proposing the first step in our plan to make a library that even commoners could use.

“Opening the book room and temple classroom to the wealthy sounds like an excellent idea,” I said. “The children of merchants who do business with nobles will rejoice to have somewhere to practice carrying themselves. I am told there are few such instructors among the lower class.”

“Oh? Did you hear that from the Plantin Company?” Ferdinand asked, eyeing me carefully. Was he prying for fragments of my lost memories? Though my thoughts were blurred and unreliable, I dug through them as best I could.

“No, they were still the Gilberta Company at the time. My attendants were in the orphanage director’s chambers, and... Hmm? Aaah, I think I remember them training waiters for the Italian restaurant.”

Leon’s face arose in my mind. He was an apprentice back then. There must have been others there too, but I couldn’t remember them.

As I continued to rack my brain, I remembered that Leon had always grimaced at me. I wondered why that was.

"I see..." Ferdinand replied. "Is there a reason you want children who seek connections with nobles to be able to attend temple classes?"

"Oh, right. Once it becomes normal for merchants with noble connections to frequent the temple's classes, craftspeople trying to secure patrons will attempt to follow suit. That much is clear from the Gutenbergs."

Ferdinand nodded and wrote something on a nearby sheet of paper.

"Moving on," he said, "though your planning was fascinating on a conceptual level, when put into practice, the library and printing industry would take far too much precedence. We must take a more realistic approach. First, we should rebuild the areas severely damaged during the Lanzenavians' attack. The port, Noble's Quarter, and temple, to name a few. Then, the guilds. You will want to hear their thoughts while finalizing the plans, I imagine."

Then, Ferdinand gave a slight smirk. "This sounds like an excellent opportunity to train the scholars who are only used to giving orders, not receiving them."

Well, it was true that we needed scholars who could work with commoners while also completing their duties. I saw no reason to complain.

"Performing a large-scale *entwickeln* to rebuild the entire city at once would put a tremendous strain on the commoners," I said. "We should arrange meetings with them and then schedule the reconstruction piecemeal. Hartmut and Justus have the most experience with commoners, so we should assign one of them to train the scholars. As for the architecture, I would rather we base it on existing Ahrensbach buildings. The climate here is not the same as in Ehrenfest."

Ahrensbach's current architecture must have come about for a reason, I thought. Maybe the style used in Ehrenfest would make summers here unbearable.

"I was going to reuse the schematics the Plantin and Gilberta Companies provided for the *entwickeln* in Groschel..." Ferdinand said.

"Advise them against it, but leave the final decision in their hands." It was important that the architecture match the climate, but the merchants would surely have their own preferences for the layout and the rooms and such. We would prioritize their needs

above all else.

I continued, "The Gutenbergs cannot settle here until they have places to live and do business. We shall put them in the same part of the lower city as the Merchant's Guild."

"I suspect I already know the answer, considering how much attention you are paying to the details, but have you considered where their families are going to live?"

"Yes, of course."

Ferdinand cast his eyes down, then suddenly rolled up the schematics for my new city.

"Hey!" I cried. "I wasn't done looking at those! Spread them out again!"

"That is enough for now, lest you grow so excited that you end up bedridden again. It is almost first bell. Are you content enough to go back to sleep?"

I shook my head. "Sleeping will make my mana come back. I'd rather hold out for as long as I can."

"And what of your hunger? It must be worse than before. You did not eat much for someone whose appetite has returned."

I nodded glumly. "Do you have any ideas for what I can do?" Dinner hadn't done much to satiate me, and now I was hungrier than ever.

"Some," Ferdinand replied. He scanned the room before pausing and using a waschen on his hands. Then he poured just a drop of red potion onto his fingertip.

"Ferdinand...?" I asked, staring at him in surprise as he came closer. He pressed the drop of potion against my lips, then pulled away.

"Is it bitter?" he asked, wiping his finger with a handkerchief.

I licked my lips, expecting the same sharp taste as before. "No, not very." It didn't taste of much at all, though my tongue did sting a little.

"Good. Your hunger might be connected to the amount of mana you lost yesterday. Your body is attempting to warn you that your life is in danger, an indication that you have almost been drained."

It made sense that nobody else had connected my hunger to my dearth of mana; any other noble would have drunk a rejuvenation potion long before their reserves dropped this low. My circumstances were special in that I needed to expend my mana practically nonstop. I wasn't even giving my body time to recover as

I rushed to eject all the mana that came back overnight.

"I, too, felt something akin to starvation when I was trapped inside Ahrensbach's replenishment hall," Ferdinand explained. "I suspect it was the result of my mana decreasing slowly rather than all at once. We should drain the rest of yours in one go, if we can. Unless you wish to endure an immense amount of pain."

"It's going to get even worse...? Oh gods," I muttered, instinctively stepping away from Ferdinand. I couldn't take any more of this.

"Not if you follow my advice. The more divine power we remove, the less it will hurt when your mana is redyed."

"I see..." He seemed strangely motivated, but I wasn't going to question it—not when there was a risk of my situation getting even worse.

"You asked me to draw healing circles for you, did you not? Could you not use that duplication spell of yours to create several at once? As I recall, the spell does not require the names of the gods."

I cocked my head in thought. "It doesn't, no, and the risk seems reasonably small. If nothing else, I won't need to worry about another wayward whirlpool. That said, the spell only works on surfaces with mana. We don't have a sheet of fey paper large enough for me to use several magic circles at once."

"Would the ground not suffice? Barren though it might be, it does contain *some* mana."

He was right—the earth *did* contain mana. The magic circles in the Royal Academy's gathering spots were carved straight into the ground, so it wasn't the craziest idea.

"It *sounds* feasible..." I mused. "Still, I don't know how much I can expand the circles. We never had time to experiment with changing their size."

"Aah, yes..." Ferdinand muttered, his brow furrowed. He must have remembered that it was his decision for us to postpone our research. "I thought we could restore Alexandria with a circle as large as the one above the Royal Academy... but perhaps that is too much even for your abnormal 'copy and place' spell."

Excuse me?

"You should consider your own abnormality before slandering my work," I shot back. "Besides, have you forgotten that the magic circle above the Academy was made by Erwaermen and the gods back in ancient times, when the gods were much closer to

Yurgenschmidt than they are now?"

Long ago, a Zent had secured the gods' aid through Erwaermen, then combined several magic circles based on Erwaermen's feystone to establish what we now knew as the Royal Academy's grounds. Creating our own massive circle for Alexandria sounded outright impossible.

"Something on that scale could never be performed in the modern era, when... when..." Words failed me as inspiration struck. "Or maybe it could..."

"Stop! I cannot permit you to seek help from Erwaermen or the gods. Let us think of another method. Would it not be more reliable for you to expand the feystone for this highbeast to its maximum size, inscribe it with healing magic circles, and then extend its range as much as you can using Clarissa's magic?"

Despite having come up with the idea in the first place, Ferdinand withdrew at the slightest indication that I might get the gods involved. I fell into thought, then formed my Grutrissheit and started searching through it.

"Well, it seems we won't need to ask Erwaermen *or* the gods for help..." I said. "Not when you have fragments of the former."

"Aah, those..." Ferdinand raised an eyebrow at me.

"And we have more than enough divine mana right here." I spread my arms wide. "Considering how much anguish it's caused me, I think I deserve to use some as I please. Not to mention, you're interested in reviving magecraft lost since ancient times, are you not?"

Ferdinand grimaced in response to my argument but took out some plain sheets of paper nonetheless. His interest was clear even as he muttered, "We do not have time to research this in full..."

"It shouldn't be too hard if, rather than combining circles with various elements and purposes as they did at the Academy, we simply expand a restoration circle. Here. Look."

I presented a section of my Book that described the ancient method of performing large-scale magic. Ferdinand peered down at it, then began dissecting the complex magic circles. He couldn't use his own Book when our retainers were around.

"I see," he said. "If *this* decides the range, we could cover all of Alexandria by placing the center of our circle at the foundation and using the border gates as endpoints. Can my fragments of Erwaermen take the place of his feystone?"

“They won’t be as durable—that is, they won’t last very long—but that shouldn’t be an issue if we use my divine power to turn them into feystones.”

Ferdinand shook his head. “Looking at these instructions, it would suit our needs better to keep the materials as they are—especially when this constitutes a single use. Moreover, as we have neither the time nor the resources to experiment, we should recreate the original magic circle as faithfully as we can. We cannot risk failure.”

Before I could even respond, Ferdinand set about writing. His pen moved at an exceptional speed, producing a long list of disconnected words. A memo, perhaps?

“Rozemyne,” he continued, not even looking up from his paper, “after breakfast, dismiss your highbeast and come with me to the castle. I need you to ‘place’ this magic circle inside the fragments of Erwaermen stashed in my hidden room. Otherwise, preserve your stamina. My scholars shall spread the word to the giebes while Hartmut returns the divine instruments to the temple. Order Roderick and Clarissa to inform those of the Noble’s Quarter.”

“As you wish.”

“Leonore, Eckhart—station knights from our guard at each border gate. You may decide who is best suited to the task. Once you are done, inform the other retainers that we are returning to the castle after breakfast.”

“Yes, sir!”

Ferdinand was giving out a fresh wave of orders when his voice started to sound distant. An uncomfortable heat was spreading through me. I clapped my Book of Mestionora shut, conscious that I must have overused it.

A look of concern on his face, Ferdinand touched my forehead, then my wrist. His features twisted in a grimace. “Though I can prepare the border gates on my own, I will need your divine mana and your duplication spell when we make the magic circle. The process would take far too long otherwise. That said, no matter how quickly we work, it will not be ready for activation until tonight. Can you endure one more day...?”

“Of course,” I replied with a smile. “Compared to when I thought I might be stuck like this forever, a single day is nothing.”

Ferdinand knit his brow. “Do not overtax your strength. We will need to brew when we reach the castle, so get some rest before

then. I will need some too.”

His words hung in the air for a moment before he briskly started putting away his paperwork. Eckhart provided some assistance. I’d gone to bed straight after dinner, so I wasn’t feeling too tired, but what about Ferdinand...? He hadn’t slept, from what I could tell, and would probably resume his work as soon as he’d eaten breakfast.

He said the circle wouldn’t be ready until tonight, at the earliest. I just worry he won’t sleep at all.

For all my lounging in bed, I wasn’t able to get much rest. My mana had recovered, as expected, and the sensation reminded me of the days I’d spent battling my Devouring heat. I remembered the pain and discomfort I’d endured, unable even to leave my bed as my mana swelled. But for some reason, I couldn’t remember anyone else who might have been around at the time.

When, oh when will my memories come back...?

Ferdinand had said they would return with the new Zent’s coronation, but that was before the gods plagued me with their divine power. My recovery was more important—I understood that—but I wasn’t getting any better. The pain racking my body had found a friend in my starvation. I didn’t want to die without remembering those I cared about.

Well, today’s the day! I’m getting rid of this divine power, no matter what!

To keep fear from taking over, I urged my thoughts in another direction. Was the requirement for nobles to keep their emotions under control at all times a hangover from when they were closer to the gods and rampaging mana was more dangerous?

After breakfast, I returned to the castle. My retainers started carrying out their instructions while I worked with Ferdinand in his hidden room. He used a Lanzenave knife to shave down and gradually flatten Erwaermen’s white branches, onto which I would paste our healing magic circles.

“Those branches sure are small...” I mused aloud. “Maybe we could use normal-sized magic circles and then figure out a way to shrink them down.” Just the thought of needing to draw super tiny circles made my head ache.

Ferdinand gave me a chilly look. “Are you even more of a fool than I thought? There is no time. Give up and draw them.”

I don't wanna! I'm bad with precise, detailed drawings! This is your area of expertise, so why don't you do it?!

As much as I wanted to complain, Ferdinand was busy enough pouring feystones, gold dust, and expensive-looking ingredients into his brewing pot. I couldn't ask him to draw the circles for me. My only choice was to manage on my own—but as I steeled my resolve, a piece of fey paper flew my way.

"See if you can duplicate this," Ferdinand said, having thrust the paper toward me.

"Woo-hoo! I knew I could count on you, Ferdinand!"

Overjoyed, I accepted the paper—a completed magic circle—and got straight to work duplicating it. As the basis of our grand creation, I would need to prepare some circles for healing and others that would allow us to use Erwaermen's branches. In my current state, it took barely any time at all.

"All done."

"Then start preparing the feystones. They will serve as receptacles for the divine power and need to be in contact with Erwaermen's fragments for the spell to work."

I see, I see. So I just need to stick them together, right? That should make them easier to carry.

I gathered together the omni-elemental feystones for the border gates, channeled my divine mana into them, and then mashed them into disks. I needed a way to keep Erwaermen's branches stable, and no better shape had come to mind.

I took the branches and started inserting them into the disks. They looked comfortable enough, and there was no way they would come apart from the feystones now. In my opinion, it was a huge success.

To create our giant circle, we would place a large feystone at the foundation, the center of our magic, and a smaller one at each of the border gates. We had already crushed the feystone I'd used to make Rainbow Lessy. It would serve as our main receptacle, so we'd turned it into a large plate and pierced it, too, with one of Erwaermen's branches. All that remained was to draw the magic circle on its underside.

"Done," I announced. "I used the feystones to lock the divine branches in place. Is that good or what?"

"Somehow, I doubt that was mentioned in your Book of Mestionora. Your methods continue to be as lighthearted and as

abnormal as ever. I would never have come up with such an idea.”

“Your praise truly honors me,” I replied. For the sake of my mental health, I would interpret his remarks as a compliment.

“If you are done, rest on the bench. You look terribly unwell. I would rather you return to your room and spend some time in bed, but you did not bring enough retainers with you.”

By holing up with Ferdinand and assisting him with his work, I was giving my retainers a bit of a break. For as long as we stayed put, everyone but the few guards by the door could rest.

“You need sleep a lot more than I do,” I said.

“I do not have the luxury. There is too much I must prepare before we can drain the last of your mana. If all goes to plan, I will get a bell to rest before the circle’s activation. I should not need any more than that.”

I strongly disagree, but okay.

Ferdinand must not have slept a wink last night; he had dark bags under his eyes and a weary look on his face. Yet he continued to work, darting from one brew to the next even as our retainers took breaks. Given that he now had the royals under his thumb, he could easily have cast me aside and returned to Ehrenfest. Instead, he had chosen to bear these hardships with me.

“Ferdinand, why are you doing all this for me?” I asked.

“Come again?” He sounded genuinely bewildered, so I did my best to elaborate.

“You haven’t sworn undying and maddening loyalty to me like Hartmut. And when you gave me your name, it wasn’t to escape death like Matthias. You know I’d return it in a heartbeat, so why haven’t you asked for it back yet? I can’t grasp the meaning of you doing all these things for me.”

“The meaning?” Ferdinand seemed to ponder the question. “I chose to stay with you because we are like family. Is that not obvious?”

I didn’t know what to say. In what world would someone do all this for their family?

“But... isn’t that strange? My father, Karstedt, would do anything for Sylvester as the knight commander. And my brother Eckhart would do anything for you. But I can’t imagine either one of them going to such great lengths for my sake. I could see Mother or Cornelius getting involved to some extent, but they would still need to conform to the standards of noble society.”

No matter how much you cared about someone, your house and duchy came first. It was unthinkable that someone would pick a fight with the gods or give their name for the sake of another person.

“Besides,” I continued, “you put me under your protection all that time ago, didn’t you? That puts you even further from being my true family.”

Ferdinand grimaced. “Speaking of true family...”

“Yes?”

“No, never mind...” he said at length, shaking his head. He looked wounded.

“Um, Ferdinand...?”

“Having kept a close eye on the expenditure and recovery of your mana over the past few days, I can say this with all certainty: activating a magic circle that covers all of Alexandria will drain whatever remains of your mana. Go rest in your room. You no longer need to fear sleep.”

Ferdinand contacted the guards stationed outside, told them to summon Angelica, and rushed me out of the room.

He’s chasing me out?!

Though he looked calm, I could sense something bubbling beneath the surface. It wasn’t anger... Rejection, maybe? Hurt? In any case, I must have been to blame. My memories of him were completely intact... right? The more I thought about it, the more it felt like something important was missing.

Ferdinand turned on his heel, about to return to his hidden room. I wanted nothing more than to reach out and grab him—to ask what I’d done wrong—but instead just watched as he took his leave.

I squeezed my eyes shut as Angelica took me in her arms.

Once again, I awoke to the most wretched pain. I muttered a few curses at the divine power swelling in my chest, then asked Gretia to help me change. We would perform our large-scale healing immediately after dinner.

Time seemed to pass in an instant, and it wasn’t long before I arrived at the hall containing Alexandria’s foundation. Ferdinand was carrying me. We’d entered through a door in the aub’s room that only the aub’s key could open.

“I thought only the aub was supposed to come here...” I said.

“You are correct, but I cannot leave you on your own when we are about to drain your mana. I also hold the key we used to get here—the one I took from Detlinde. If not even that convinces you, then you would do well to remember that, at least in terms of mana, I am the current aub of Ahrensbach, not you.”

Indeed, that peculiarity and my divine power were the reason I couldn't carry out my duties as aub. Only by performing our large-scale magic with the foundation as its center would we both drain my mana and redye me.

“Ferdinand, have you not considered taking the role of Aub Alexandria?” I asked, kneeling before the white branch that had already been put in place. “You could make the laboratory of your dreams.”

“There is no need. You have already agreed to make it for me, have you not?”

“Yes, but you could turn Alexandria into a city of research!” I exclaimed. “What happened to your ambition? Your desires? It feels like I've become the new Lord of Evil...”

“Is that so?” Ferdinand replied, his lips curling in a nefarious smirk. “My desires have a greater hold on me now than ever before.”

“Wait... Are you scheming to take over my city?! To bring all the books in the world to one place so you can add them to your collection?! How dastardly!”

“Do not project your own ridiculous desires on me.”

Huh? But... doesn't everyone dream of conquering all the libraries in the world...?

“Ridiculous” or not, I wouldn't be deterred. As one of my first acts as the new Aub Alexandria, I would ask Eglantine for transcriptions of everything being moved from the palace library to the Royal Academy.

“To achieve what I desire, I must first rid you of that divine mana,” Ferdinand said. “Let us begin.”

I realized then that he had made the last of our preparations while we spoke. I touched the plate-shaped feystone, which shone with rainbow light, and channeled my mana into it. Liquid rose from its surface until it resembled a water mirror.

The water stopped just before it could run over, and Erwaermen's pure-white branch turned a rainbow of colors. Once it was fully dyed, a pillar of omni-elemental light shot up toward the

ceiling.

That light should turn into a circle that covers all of Alexandria, but...

Inside the foundation's hall, there was no way for us to check. Or so I thought. The water began to waver, and a view of the outside appeared on its surface. Had the light passed all the way through the castle?

"Ferdinand, this is—"

"Focus. The circle is not yet complete."

"Right."

The mirror went from showing a mass of nobles in the castle, raising and waving their schtappes, to the brightly lit Noble's Quarter, the commoners' lower city, and the pitch-dark ocean. The latter was only dark at first, of course; the rainbow light soon reached its surface, revealing an expanse of swaying waves.

I was starting to wonder how far the light would take us when it arrived at the border gate nearest to the country gate. Strahl and the other knights stationed there were gawking straight at us.

"They must see the magic circle being drawn in the sky..."

Ferdinand mused. "Their expressions are rather foolish."

"Were I in their shoes, I'd probably look even dumber."

"Indeed."

Could you at least pretend to disagree?

The water mirror passed the awestruck knights to show us Erwaermen's branch sitting inside the border gate. Then it returned to the sky. The heat within me faded a little as the circle continued to stretch across Alexandria, draining more of my mana in the process.

"Where is it going this time?" I asked.

"To the Dunkelfelger border gate, most likely. It is closer than the others."

Eckhart and several other guards were stationed there. Would we see them stare at us with funny looks on their faces? I certainly hoped so, but they weren't the only ones at the gate; Dunkelfelger's knights had rushed to the forefront of the group and were enthusiastically thrusting their fingers up at the sky. Eckhart was doing his best to stop them from touching Erwaermen's branch.

Aah... Of all the gates, this one might be the hardest to protect. Godspeed, Eckhart.

I couldn't help but laugh as the light moved on to the next gate.

More of my mana was sucked out, and the hunger I was feeling transformed into starvation. My head started to spin.

“We must be approaching Old Werkestock,” I said, trying not to think about my health.

“Most likely. Laurenz and the others are protecting that branch. It will not be particularly exciting.”

“Can we expect to see knights from Old Werkestock?”

Ferdinand shook his head. “I closed the gate when placing Erwaermen’s branch. You will reopen it with Lord Trauerqual after the Archduke Conference, when he has been made the new Aub Werkestock.”

In hindsight, closing the gate made perfect sense. Some of Old Werkestock’s nobles had participated in the invasion of Ehrenfest, and those who had supported Georgine and Detlinde had gleefully obstructed Ferdinand while spreading unpleasant rumors about him.

Oh, it’s Laurenz.

He and several other knights were in a dark, barely lit room, standing in a protective circle around their branch of Erwaermen. As they looked up at us, their faces showed not jaw-dropping shock but admiration.

“No particularly embarrassing faces this time...” I sighed.

“The area around their gate has little in the way of obstructions. They must have an excellent view of the circle spreading across the sky.”

“Ah! One of the knights just started praying! I guess Hartmut’s lessons went a little too far...”

“They did not go far enough, in my opinion.”

No, no. This is plenty...

As soon as that thought crossed my mind, another branch appeared in the mirror, and the light returned to shooting through the sky. My mana was sucked out again, and the heat causing me so much discomfort vanished. It felt less like my fever had gone down and more like my mana was running so low that my body couldn’t produce any warmth at all.

But I can’t stop now.

We soon arrived at Frenbelta’s border gate, where Matthias and some other guards were stationed. There were knights from Frenbelta there too, but we weren’t welcomed with the same crazed enthusiasm we’d seen from Dunkelfelger. Instead, they

stared up at the sky as if overwhelmed.

“That’s rare...” I said. “Matthias actually looks... proud.” Ever since the incident with his father, he’d spent his time frowning or wearing some other bitter, tortured expression.

“If you wish to see it become the norm, then become someone he can feel proud to serve.”

“Mm... That sounds tough. I don’t want him to be miserable, but I plan to devote all my time to overseeing my library and reading books. Um, all my time not spent carrying out my duties, of course.”

“Good grief...” Ferdinand uttered with a wry smile. “You never change, do you?” He turned to look at me, then took in a sharp breath. I was in such an awful state that not even he could mask his concern.

“We’re nearly done,” I said, stopping him when he reached out to check my temperature. Ehrenfest’s border gate was especially close to Frenbeltag’s, and it appeared in the water mirror before long. Cornelius was stationed there, to my understanding.

“Grandfather...?”

To my surprise, Bonifatius was at the gate. He had picked up Cornelius—an adult male and a knight at that—and was now swinging him about. It couldn’t have been as easy as he was making it look.

“I contacted Sylvester around noon,” Ferdinand explained, exasperated. “Bonifatius declared that he would watch our work from the border gate, since he was unable to attend the Royal Academy’s transference ceremony. I did not expect him to arrive in time. If nothing else, we were right to station Cornelius there; Bonifatius seems much too excited, and nobody else would have been able to contain him.”

I tried to laugh, but it came out as a scratchy croak. My dizziness got worse, and my breathing became so shallow that I actually had to focus on inhaling enough air. My hands and feet were going numb.

“Just a little longer, Rozemyne,” Ferdinand said. He was right beside me, but it sounded as though he were all the way on the other side of the room.

My vision blurred. We were in the final stretch. The light just needed to pass back over the dark waters and return to the castle. I tried to assure Ferdinand that I was fine, but my voice revealed the

truth, and my hold on the feystone plate weakened.

“Rozemyne, lean against me if you must. Just keep your hands on the plate.”

Ferdinand sat beside me, placed a hand atop both of mine, and wrapped an arm around me as my body went limp. He was normally cold to the touch but now felt burning hot. My eyelids drooped, though I still clung to consciousness.



“O Goddess of Water Flutrane, bringer of healing and change. O twelve goddesses who serve by her side. Please hear my prayer and lend me your divine strength...”

Ferdinand started chanting a quick prayer. We must have completed the circle. I waited nervously for the divine power within me to respond, but nothing happened; I was almost completely out of mana. Though my body was cold and even moving was too much for me, relief spread through my heart when I realized it was finally over.

Ferdinand... The rest is in your hands.

As he continued to chant the prayer, the world around me faded into darkness.

Epilogue

An ordonnanz arrived and announced that Lord Ferdinand and the aub would take their meals in the latter's office in the castle. Gretia, Lieseleta, and Justus all moved to the neighboring retainers' room.

Gretia waited patiently as the dumbwaiter churned, then opened its door and wheeled out a small trolley from within.

"As always, test for poison," Justus instructed, eyes narrowed in a sharp stare.

Together with Lieseleta, Gretia started testing their lady's food. They wiped the plates and cutlery with cloths soaked in a potion that would react to poison, then used the same potion on a small sample of each dish. Such procedures were taught as part of the Royal Academy's attendant course and could thus be carried out by any decent retainer, but those in Rozemyne's retinue had also been taught nonstandard, more thorough methods—courtesy of Justus, of course.

"Soup with arspium requires special care," he said. "Though harmless in isolation, it becomes poisonous when mixed with dolch. Extract a spoonful of soup from the bowl, pour it onto a potion-doused cloth, and then test the rim of the bowl for good measure."

Justus's lessons focused on various poisons not covered at the Royal Academy. His knowledge of plants native to Ahrensbach and tools used only in Lanzenave were essential to Gretia and Lieseleta, attendants of a future aub.

I appreciate his assistance, but he knows far too much about poison... As do the others serving Lord Ferdinand, for that matter.

Lasfam, in particular, came to mind. He had a peaceful demeanor, always wore a calm smile, and had even welcomed commoners into the library he attended. Gretia knew him as a very trusting man, but that side of him vanished when he had to prepare meals for his lord. He refused to put his faith in anyone, even Rozemyne's personal chefs.

During the evacuation, Lasfam had tested every dish made by

the commoner women who had volunteered to cook, then scoured the kitchen from top to bottom for anything that could pose a threat when they were done. He had used the opportunity to show Liesele and Gretia what to look out for when preparing Ehrenfest food and warned them to be even more cautious going forward. The court chefs prepared the same dishes for everyone in the dining hall, but that didn't mean Gretia could slack on testing them for poison. She would also need to learn the risks associated with foods from other regions.

Back then, I thought he was being overly cautious because of our plans to move to the Sovereignty. But now...

Lasfam's warning cut deep. They had moved not to the Sovereignty but to Ahrensbach, a duchy rife with Detlinde sympathizers and those who took issue with an Ehrenfest noble having stolen their foundation. Even those in Letizia's faction were scheming—against her wishes, of course. Though their goals were all over the place, they had found common ground in their desire to assassinate Rozemyne before the next Archduke Conference, when she would officially be recognized as the next aub, and install Letizia in her place.

We would never have noticed on our own.

Most of Gretia's and the others' intelligence had come from Ferdinand and his retainers, who had moved to Ahrensbach one and a half years earlier and investigated the region's unique plants and poisons. Gretia was more grateful to them than she could put into words; they were an invaluable source of wisdom for Rozemyne's retainers, especially when their lady would soon be looked down upon as an underage, female aub.

"Put some of this in your mouth, then spit it into the cloth," Justus explained. "Asiress juice reacts with saliva and turns poisonous once ingested."

Only once the dishes had been thoroughly tested for poison were they allowed to be served. Rozemyne would normally try to eat dinner in the dining hall with Letizia, but on this particular occasion, she would take her meal in the aub's room with Ferdinand. They had sent away their knights while getting ready to perform a large-scale magic spell, and only those who could enter the archduke's living area could reach them. As it stood, that permission extended solely to Ehrenfest nobles. No one from Ahrensbach, not even those serving Ferdinand, could reach the pair

in their current location.

Some nobles were against Ferdinand using the archduke's living area when he was not even properly engaged, but their protests fell on deaf ears. It was still unclear which Ahrensbach nobles could be trusted, and Ferdinand was absolutely necessary to perform the spell.

"Those who are not name-sworn, leave," Ferdinand ordered after dinner.

Lieseleta pushed a trolley loaded with plates out of the room, while Leonore and Angelica moved to guard the outside of the door.

"Gretia, send an ordonnanz when Lady Rozemyne returns from the foundation," Leonore said.

Under normal circumstances, when the aub was visiting the foundation's hall, only archnobles belonging to a branch of the duchy's archducal family were allowed inside their room. Gretia was but a mednoble. She was allowed to stay only because the other name-sworn had gone elsewhere to help prepare for the spell.

"Ferdinand, is it really okay for you to enter the foundation's hall...?" Rozemyne asked, a look of concern on her face as she watched the retainers leave. The aub normally entered alone while their retinue isolated themselves in the retainers' room or waited patiently behind a screen. So many exceptions were being made.

"It matters not," he replied. "We are about to recreate the entire duchy as Alexandria, and anyone who might spread the word of my trespass can easily be silenced. Be aware, however, that this will never happen again. Once the castle has been rebuilt, neither I nor any of our name-sworn may be permitted these exceptions."

Coming from Ferdinand, it was a shocking declaration. He was known for violating customs without a second thought when he considered it necessary.

Ferdinand took a name stone in hand. "Justus, I forbid you from spreading any information about Ahrensbach's foundation. Rozemyne, give Gretia and me the same order."

Rozemyne grimaced, reached down to the cage hanging at her waist, and touched two of the stones inside. She had received the names of many of her retainers but generally loathed using their stones to give orders. Ferdinand, in contrast, seemed to use his quite regularly.

"Ferdinand, Gretia," she said, "I forbid you both from spreading any information about Ahrensbach's foundation."

“Understood.”

Ferdinand slotted a key into the door leading to the foundation’s hall. He was holding several feystones containing Rozemyne’s mana in his other hand, as he always did when acting as the archduke. His reasoning was apparently the same as why the Royal Academy’s professors kept feystones packed with royal mana, but neither Gretia nor her fellow retainers could confirm it; they had not taken the archduke candidate course.

“Your hand, Rozemyne,” Ferdinand instructed, reaching out to her.

She accepted it, then took a shaky step forward.

“Fare thee well, Lady Rozemyne,” Gretia said. “I shall make the preparations necessary for you to rest upon your return.”

Rozemyne looked back and gave a weak smile of acknowledgment. Her exhaustion was clear on her face, to no one’s surprise; she had spent the past three days enduring outright torture as her divine power ran rampant. Gretia had served her more closely than anyone else during that time, and she, too, had considered it a torturous experience.

Oh, why must my lady endure such agony?!

Gretia was furious at the gods for being so unreasonable. Still, she hid those emotions and simply smiled at Rozemyne in response, as she always would.

Rozemyne and Ferdinand entered the foundation’s hall and closed the door behind them. Gretia’s vision blurred the moment her lady was out of sight. She wiped the tears from her bluish-green eyes and took deep breaths in an attempt to regain her composure.

“Lord Justus,” she said, “did my smile look normal?”

“Yes, I would say so.”

Gretia had already been told about her lady’s plan. Rozemyne would use the large-scale spell to exhaust her mana and divine power, then return her mana to its previous state. She had no other options; only by reaching the very brink of death could she escape the cause of her torment. The gods’ power swelled and clashed within her, causing more pain than a human could normally survive.

What a mess the gods have made!

Gretia was outraged that her lady needed to go to such extreme lengths just to stay alive, but she took some comfort in knowing that Ferdinand was by her side. He had searched desperately for a

means to save Rozemyne and was doing everything in his power to help her.

“Lord Ferdinand said they would use liquid mana made from gold dust and feystones dyed completely with her mana,” Gretia said. “I must admit, I am shocked that such a thing is even possible.”

To make liquid mana, one had to remove the varied mana from water and replace it with one’s own. Anyone who performed the process would invariably channel their own mana into the mix, so Gretia had considered it impossible to make liquid mana in someone else’s stead.

And yet, Ferdinand claimed to have made some using Rozemyne’s mana.

“Is that something all archnobles can do?” Gretia asked.

“It is beyond me,” Justus replied. “There are many things that only Lord Ferdinand can accomplish.”

Many scholars found it suspicious, but the liquid mana had indeed matched the mana inside Rozemyne’s feystones. There were faint variations, of course, but that was to be expected; mana always changed to some degree when it was being manipulated. Hartmut and Justus had concluded that said variations would not impede attempts to redye Rozemyne’s mana.

“It frustrates me how little I can do for Lady Rozemyne...” Gretia muttered.

“Hah. If you mean in comparison to Lord Ferdinand, then of course. Hartmut and Lieselea have learned enough between themselves to serve as Lady Rozemyne’s doctor, but they bemoan not being able to do any more than Lord Ferdinand has taught them.”

Gretia understood the feeling all too well. She was not the only retainer frustrated with her failure to adapt to Rozemyne’s new circumstances. Ferdinand, on the other hand, appeared to have taken it all in his stride.

“Yes, there is a reason my lady trusts him more than anyone else...” Gretia said. “Even in light of his absence.”

Perhaps because he had already moved to Ahrensbach when she became Rozemyne’s retainer, Gretia found it strange that Ferdinand was by her lady’s side at all times. She also found it hard to believe that not even Hartmut had managed to replace him, considering the former’s attentiveness and everything he had done

for her behind the scenes.

Justus chuckled. "It was only a year and a half—not even as long as Lady Rozemyne spent in her jureve. Lord Ferdinand has protected her health and status since she was a frail girl in the temple and educated her so that she could survive as the archduke's adopted daughter. Finding someone to replace him was always a tremendous task. A husband might have been able to surpass him, but nobody will ever take his place now that they are engaged."

Gretia understood, but that did not make it any more appealing. Her dissatisfaction must have shown on her face because Justus raised an eyebrow.

"You seem displeased. Do you dislike Lord Ferdinand?"

"Far from it," Gretia replied at once. Even if she *had* taken issue with him, she was not so stupid as to complain about him to his name-sworn retainer. Her lady ended up in the most bizarre situations, and Gretia truly believed that Ferdinand was best suited to keep her safe.

"I gave my name to Lady Rozemyne because she saved me," she continued, casting her eyes down. "My displeasure stems from not being able to repay my debt to her." There was nothing she could do to rescue her lady from the gods now toying with her life.

"You are your own savior," Justus replied. "Having the resolve to escape your past treatment—and succeeding in doing so—commands a lot of respect. Take pride in your decision and the fact that you saw it through."

Gretia could not suppress a gasp. "You... know about me, Lord Justus? How?" There was much she had deliberately kept back from her fellow retainers. How much did the man standing before her know?

Justus shrugged. "Did you expect Lord Ferdinand not to investigate you simply because you are from the same duchy? The playroom, in particular, escapes the attention of many an adult. He looked into the history of every child who would attend with Lady Rozemyne and paid especially close attention to those he thought were likely to give their names. We know everything about you—your first employer, when you developed mana-sensing..."

The daughter of a blue priest and blue shrine maiden of mednoble origin, Gretia had grown up in a side building on her mother's family estate. Even as a child, she had worried about what

her future might hold; her mother had been treated no better than a gray flower bearer ever since being brought back from the temple, and Gretia, a fellow child of the temple, feared she would share the same fate.

Instead, Gretia ended up being taken from the side building and baptized as the daughter of her maternal uncle and his first wife. The decision had come about for several reasons: the scarcity of nobles since the purge, the fact that she had more mana than any of the other children due to become servants, and the house's desire for a daughter to use in a political marriage.

Becoming a noble did painfully little to improve Gretia's life—she had gone from being largely ignored in the side building to being the subject of constant scrutiny in its main counterpart. She was mocked by her brothers for her background, criticized whenever she made the slightest error, and teased relentlessly when she hit puberty and grew more than the others her age. Each day had felt like perpetual torment.

Raised as a pawn to be used in a political marriage, Gretia had prayed that she would one day escape her home. Only then would she be treated as a regular noble. She had resolved to go to any length to escape, even if she had to marry someone older than her father.

But her wish never came true. As soon as she developed mana-sensing, Gretia was presented not to prospective grooms but to men who wanted a concubine—a mistress who would also attend to their wives or daughters. Her father described it as the perfect job for a child of the temple and sold Gretia to the highest bidder: Giebe Wiltord.

Both the Giebe and his eldest son were later executed during the purge, but Gretia did not rejoice. She had been violated by them both, and returning home would only doom her to a life of never-ending misery. That was why she had sought protection among Rozemyne's name-sworn.

“Now that Giebe Wiltord and his family have been executed, only Lord Ferdinand, his three name-sworn, and your house know about your past,” Justus said. It was a much smaller number than Gretia had expected. “Hartmut and Cornelius also ran checks on Lady Rozemyne's name-sworn, but faction walls limited their reach; I suspect they learned only as much as the public already knew.

Were they to try again now, they would probably dig deeper.”

Hartmut’s research had corroborated Gretia’s account of her past, so he had elected not to pry any further—much to her relief.

“Though I now serve Lady Rozemyne, I feel entirely useless,” Gretia said. “As long as my lady has Lord Ferdinand, I cannot see why she would need anyone else. It leaves me frustrated with my own inadequacies and envious of your lord, on whom she depends for everything. I wish there were just one area in which I was superior.” She took issue with her situation, not with Ferdinand.

Justus nodded and said, “I know how you feel.”

Stunned, Gretia could only stare in shock. She had never expected Justus, an expert scholar and attendant and a very capable knight, to agree with her.

“I gave my name to Lord Ferdinand as a show of devotion yet constantly lose to Lady Rozemyne when it comes to rescuing him. I am glad to see him healthy and at peace, but it also frustrates me.”

Justus spoke in a light, somewhat teasing voice, and Gretia could not help but laugh a little. It was comforting to know that even someone so competent was dealing with the same problem.

“Aah. It’s begun,” Justus said, staring outside.

Gretia looked as well and saw a green light dart through the sky above, so bright that she almost forgot it was nighttime. Excited cries bled through the window, but their source was out of sight. Gretia started to ponder what might be happening when an ordonnanz shot into the room and perched on her arm.

“This is Hartmut. A ray of green light just shot out of the castle and is ascending high, high into the sky. It is the perfect opportunity to teach Ahrensbach’s nobles about Lady Rozemyne’s splendor, but what is there to say that this divine sight does not already encapsulate? In any case, as you and Lord Justus must not be able to see the full extent of the miracle, I shall appreciate it enough for you both. Aah, the light has started toward the country gate! Praise be to Lady Rozemyne!”

The cheers and shouts of those outside mixed with Hartmut’s enthusiastic rant. So lively was the clamor that one would think a festival was being held.

“There is a circle forming in the sky right now. How annoying that he gets to see it all...” Justus griped. He was pressing his face against the window in a desperate but ultimately futile attempt to see as much of the spectacle as he could. It was unsightly behavior

for someone who had acted so properly mere moments ago and made Gretia wonder whether she should even continue their conversation.

“Um... Hartmut and Clarissa are bound to be recording the event with a magic tool,” she finally said.

“This is no ordinary spell; it heralds a revival of the age of myth! Nobody would settle for a mere recording!”

Gretia could not relate; she was more concerned about her lady in the foundation’s hall. She would certainly have watched the light if they had had a better view, but she was not excited enough to cast aside her decency.

Another ordonnanz soon arrived. It was up to Gretia to receive any correspondence meant for the aub; although Justus was stationed in the room with her, his duty was instead to rush out and provide assistance at the first sign of trouble.

“This is Strahl,” the little bird said. “We just saw the light at our border gate, and an enormous magic circle began stretching across the sky. The light has since departed—to Dunkelfelger’s gate, it would seem.”

It was a brief report, Gretia thought, but the knight’s wonder came through in every word. He had voiced some doubts when he was handed a rainbow feystone with a white branch sprouting from the top and told to take it to the border gate, so he must have been more taken aback than most. Gretia had a sudden urge to peer outside, though it faded when she saw Justus with his cheek still pressed against the glass.

“Oh, another ordonnanz,” she said. Not long had passed since the previous one.

“This is Eckhart. The green light just arrived at our gate, and a magic circle is steadily forming in the sky. We have a problem, though. Dunkelfelger’s knights are... Hey! I told you to stay back! Keep your distance!”

Eckhart spoke in a raised voice, battling to be heard over the bustle of Dunkelfelger’s border gate. Gretia could practically see him kicking aside the overeager knights, and only then did she understand why he, of all the retainers, had needed to be stationed there.

Just as Lord Ferdinand said, the post would have been too much for Matthias or Cornelius...

“Oooh!” Justus cried, causing Gretia to jump. “The circle is

coming into view, Gretia! It's going from the north to the east! Want a look?"

Gretia shook her head, then took a step back for good measure. A small section of the window had turned opaque, courtesy of some heavy breathing from Justus. His intensity was actually rather terrifying.

"I shall wait here for when the next ordonnanz arrives," she said. And soon enough...

"This is Laurenz. The light reached this branch and continued to spread out. I guess Ehrenfest's border gate is next. It's an impressive sight. Some people are saying they feel bad that Old Werkestock won't be included in the spell."

Gretia scrunched up her face. She understood the Ahrensbach nobles' compassion for Old Werkestock, but had they forgotten about its involvement in the recent invasion? As far as she was concerned, Rozemyne was under no obligation to help such people.

And even if she did, they would probably find a way to resent her for it.

Gretia recalled the information she and the other retainers had exchanged prior to their meeting with the royal family. Ferdinand had asked them for their thoughts on absorbing Ahrensbach's portion of Old Werkestock into Alexandria. His retainers from Ahrensbach had supported the idea, arguing that they had more family in Old Werkestock than a decade ago and that it was best to expand one's territory when the opportunity arose, but everyone from Ehrenfest had opposed it.

There is absolutely no need for Lady Rozemyne to risk her life restoring the land of her enemies.

A frown creased Gretia's brow as she watched the magic circle, which could now be seen without needing to press one's face against the window. She saw the beauty in a spell that would restore the entire duchy at once, but the circle's enormity made her breath catch. It was hard to believe Rozemyne was creating it all on her own, and the thought that it was shaving down her life was terrifying. Gretia turned nervously to the door leading to the foundation's hall.

Another ordonnanz perched on her arm.

"This is Matthias. The light arrived without issue. It really is awe-inspiring. I almost want to throw my arms up like Hartmut and pray to Lady Rozemyne."

Then why hold back?

Rozemyne's divine mana had inspired a change in her retainers. They were even more loyal to her than before and often struck with the compulsion to kneel before their lady. Cornelius had said it was like her name-sworn had all turned into Hartmut, and indeed, the same phenomenon was occurring within Gretia. She was proud to have given her all in service of someone so grand and understood that she was developing a blind obsession of sorts.

Perhaps that is why I do not fear dying with her if the worst comes to pass.

Gretia was still pondering the matter when yet another ordonnanz arrived. "This is Cornelius. The light has reached Ehrenfest." It was a short, simple message, but his voice wavered, and a booming "UWOHHH! ROZEMYNE!" risked drowning him out.

I wonder if my lady remembers Lord Bonifatius...

Gretia knew about Rozemyne's missing memories. It was the cost of a goddess having descended into her, and one could guess from Ferdinand's treatment of the matter that retrieving them would not be easy.

Still, Lady Rozemyne is dead set on it.

It was an unfortunate situation, but Rozemyne's lost memories did not seem to be causing her any issues. Gretia saw no reason for her lady to attempt anything dangerous to regain them—not when she could simply rebuild whatever she was missing. No matter what Rozemyne remembered, Gretia would continue to serve her.

"Aah, I can't see it!" Justus exclaimed. "I can't see any more changes! That was an ordonnanz from Ehrenfest's border gate, right? That must mean it's about to be finished. I want to see the completed magic circle with my own eyes. How must it look from the skies above?"

Snapping back to her senses, Gretia peered out the window at the magic circle now covering the sky. It had stopped changing, but the spell seemed incomplete. She awaited Clarissa's ordonnanz in a state of near panic.

Gretia's eyes were drawn more to the foundation's hall than to the window. She was terribly worried about Rozemyne's health. Unpleasant thoughts overran her mind—her lady collapsing midway through the spell or failing to completely drain her mana—and an important warning resurfaced.

"This spell will drain Rozemyne's mana almost entirely. There is a

chance she will die, and if she does, her name-sworn will ascend to the towering heights with her. Be prepared for the worst-case scenario."

Such words of caution had come from Ferdinand and were given only to the name-sworn who would pass away with their lady. Leonore and Cornelius most likely had a vague understanding of the risk, but they had not been told directly.

"If she meets her demise, so, too, will the world. You, me, the new Zent—we will all die, and Yurgenschmidt will soon follow."

Part of Gretia opposed the risk that Ferdinand was taking—the fate of the entire country depended on Rozemyne—but she also agreed with his insanity.

If the gods truly wish for Yurgenschmidt's survival, then they need only keep my lady alive.

They were especially taken with Rozemyne, who had prayed and given more mana than anyone else, but had gotten much too involved in the world of men. It was not right to force a child to grow into an adult or to force divine mana into her, considering the limits of the human body.

The gods can reflect on their foolish deeds, which put the entire country in danger, and then dedicate themselves to keeping Lady Rozemyne alive.

If made to choose between her lady's life and Yurgenschmidt's continued existence, Gretia would choose the former every time. The gods had not saved her—Rozemyne had.

And a life outside her service would not be worth living.

Gretia was still underage. In the event that she somehow survived Rozemyne's death, she would be sent back to her family home. She would much rather die alongside her lady than let that happen, she thought—and that was when the ordonnanz she had desperately been waiting for arrived.

"This is Clarissa. It's done, Gretia! It was a huge success! The sky above the duchy is completely covered, and green light is raining down on us. It's divine! More splendid than I can put into words! I expected no less from our own divine avatar!"

In the background of the message, Gretia heard applause and cheers of elation. "It would appear the spell was a success," she said.

"Right," Justus replied. "I want to see what things are like outside. I'll come right back after I..." He paused and glanced at the door to the foundation, regret seeping through his expression. "No..."

The spell was a success, so they should come out soon. We cannot move from here.”

Gretia, too, awaited their return.

Time passed, but the door showed no sign of opening. Any excitement Gretia had felt about the success of the spell was quickly replaced with anxiety.

“Is my lady well...?” she asked.

“She must be. My lord is with her,” Justus replied. His earlier enthusiasm was nowhere to be seen—a worrying sign, Gretia thought.

There must be something—anything—I can do...



Unable to bear just staring at the door, Gretia scanned the room. If she could do something useful, maybe it would ease her anxiety. But no matter how hard she searched, there was nothing more to be done; they had already finished preparing to welcome Rozemyne back. There were rejuvenation potions of all sorts on the table and a made bed ready to be used.

“Gretia, I’ll watch the door. Could you brew some tea?”

“Yes, at once.”

Gretia practically flew into the retainers’ room. Justus had given her an adequate distraction. She warmed the teapot and cups, took out some tea leaves, and poured hot water into the teapot. She knew this process all too well, but her hands were trembling so much that she had to work slowly. Another ordonnanz arrived as she was picking up one of the cups.

“This is Lieseleta. The spell was a success, was it not? Has our lady still not returned from the foundation?”

Gretia twitched. Lieseleta was waiting in another room, while Leonore and the others were guarding the door. They must have been just as worried that they had not received an update on Rozemyne. Gretia was unsure how to respond, torn between wanting to vent her anxiety and assure her fellow retainers that they had nothing to worry about.

Hurry back, Lady Rozemyne. Everyone is waiting.

But as that thought passed through her mind, Gretia remembered something important—a piece of advice from her lady.

“Pray not for yourself but for others. That is the most fundamental rule of prayer.”

In the past, Gretia had prayed incessantly for the gods to save her. They never had. Was it because she was praying for herself...? The gods were troublesome beings who did not understand the limits of mere mortals, but Rozemyne’s encounters had at least proven they were real.

If I pray for someone else—for Lady Rozemyne—then perhaps my words will reach them.

Still clutching one of the teacups, Gretia petitioned the gods. Rather than praying to pass her classes, to obtain divine protections, or at someone else’s command, she made a heartfelt request for the sake of someone dear to her. It was the first time she

had ever prayed in the true sense.

“Please let Lady Rozemyne come back safe.”

The Transference Ceremony

Coronations and the inductions of new aubs were normally held during the Archduke Conference, meaning minors could not attend, but today's ceremony was entirely unprecedented. A divine avatar was going to transfer the Grutrissheit to a new Zent. The importance of religious ceremonies was also being revisited, and every baptized child was allowed to participate as part of a wider plan to dismantle noble society's aversion to the temple.

"There are fewer children who have yet to enroll at the Royal Academy here than I expected..." I mused aloud, inspecting as much of the auditorium as I could from the seats for Dunkelfelger's archducal family. My timing with these matters was always so poor that I had given up on being able to attend, but Lady Rozemyne, the Divine Avatar of Mestionora, had gone out of her way to invite me during a meeting with royalty.

My timing must not be quite so poor anymore.

I gripped the charm that my attendant Cordula had made for me and prayed to Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time. It was surely by her guidance that I had come into such good fortune.

My brother, Lestilaut, sneered. "That should go without saying. Few aubs would want a newly baptized child to attend an event with the royal family." He looked down at the daughter of our duchy's second wife. "Even we had to hold a lengthy debate about who was safe to bring."

Father's second wife had two baptized children. We had brought Lungtase but ultimately decided to leave her elder brother, Raufereg, at home. The last thing we wanted to do was cause any disrespect.

Lestilaut had obstinately declared that, as our next aub, it was his duty to attend the ceremony and strengthen his connections with both the new Zent and the divine avatar, ultimately forcing both Uncle and Grandfather to stay behind. Of course, he had only taken that stance upon hearing from our parents that Lady Eglantine and Lady Rozemyne would perform a dedication whirl, so

his true intentions were clear to us all. Mother had made him promise not to bring any art utensils to the ceremony and even went as far as to check his belongings several times over this morning.

Even the adult heirs apparent are in a state. Few aubs would choose to bring their children.

“Still,” Lestilaut continued, “Ehrenfest brought one. I guess it was their idea to begin with. Look at him wearing his High Bishop robes. He sticks out like a sore thumb.” He was referring to Lord Melchior, a young archduke candidate.

“Lord Melchior was assigned to take Lady Rozemyne’s place as the High Bishop,” I said. We had met once before during the victory feast in Ehrenfest, and the proud smile he had worn while expressing his desire to follow in his sister’s footsteps reinforced the notion that Lady Rozemyne had not been sent to the temple as an act of abuse by her adoptive father, Aub Ehrenfest; it really was normal in Ehrenfest for archduke candidates to serve in the temple.

“Hmph. So they brought their High Bishop along as part of their plan to reinforce the importance of the temple and religious ceremonies, did they?” Lestilaut said venomously. “He must be destined to become the next Aub Ehrenfest. I do not see why Wilfried is grinning without a care in the world when both his future and fiancée have been stolen from him.”

“You say that his fiancée was stolen, but Ehrenfest internally canceled their engagement long ago so that Lady Rozemyne could be adopted by the king and marry the next Zent.” We had learned during our victory feast that the cancellation had resulted from an agreement between Aub Ehrenfest and the Zent, meaning there was nothing Lord Wilfried could have done to prevent it.

“Furthermore,” I said, “High Bishops in Ehrenfest do not necessarily become aubs. As we have seen, Lady Rozemyne held the role before, but Lord Wilfried was positioned to be the next archduke.”

Back when my brother had demanded a game of bride-stealing ditter, Lord Wilfried had declared that he would participate as Ehrenfest’s next aub. He had won and protected Lady Rozemyne, so I doubted the cancellation of an engagement outside of his control would be grounds enough to disqualify him from the role.

“He is a good-for-nothing nonetheless,” Lestilaut spat. “He said all that about keeping Rozemyne safe, but the royal family still took

her exactly as I warned during our match.”

That much was true. Despite her engagement, Lady Rozemyne had not been protected when it mattered most. It was hard to deny that the royal family had interfered in the ditto match specifically to obtain her for themselves.

“I do not disagree with you, Brother, but Lady Rozemyne was never a suitable candidate to become the first wife of Dunkelfelger. She is not one to take the reins; rather, she needs someone to keep her under control.”

Unfortunately for Lestilaut, I doubted he was the man for the job. My reasoning was hard to put into words, but Lady Rozemyne’s way of thinking was entirely unique. I recalled what she had so eagerly described while ordering my hairpin, then shook my head to dispel the thought. Only someone with a wealth of experience in a supportive role could take Lady Rozemyne’s hand. The position could never have gone to my brother, who had instead been raised to stand above others.

“And you think that ‘someone’ is Ferdinand?” Lestilaut asked.

“Indeed,” I said. “I could sense it while I was in Ehrenfest, so I am relieved to hear he is going to marry her.”

According to my parents—and much to my surprise—Lord Ferdinand would apparently have become Lady Rozemyne’s fiancé whether we had intervened or not. He had been ordered by King Trauerqual to wed the inexperienced next Aub Ahrensbach, to assist her with her administration, and, once they were married, to adopt Lady Letizia so he could raise her into the next aub. That was why he had moved to Ahrensbach and played such a crucial role in its maintenance despite not even being engaged.

As it turned out, Detlinde had not dyed her duchy’s foundation—a most unusual development, considering her obsession with being an aub. Instead, she had gotten her sister Alstede, an archnoble by marriage, to dye the foundation in her stead.

Alstede was a married woman. Her husband, Blasius, had been reduced to the rank of an archnoble as a result of the civil war, but as a former archduke candidate, he could oversee administrative work without issue. If only Alstede had been formally recognized as the next Aub Ahrensbach, the royal decree given to Lord Ferdinand would have been voided without issue.

However, Lady Rozemyne had stolen Ahrensbach’s foundation before Alstede could be recognized as the aub. She was an underage

female aub with very little experience, so the royal decree had remained active. I felt a touch foolish for having devoted so much of my attention to getting her and Lord Ferdinand together.

“Lady Rozemyne’s old engagement has been out of the question for quite some time now,” I reiterated. “And as it had the king’s permission, it follows that the royal decree would take priority. I can see, now, why Lord Ferdinand has been treating her as his fiancée and why he led Ahrensbach’s troops in her name.”

“Still, for them both to follow the king’s decree to the letter, Rozemyne will need to take an adopted daughter as soon as she is wed, and that daughter will replace her as the next aub. Society will not permit them to pick and choose which parts of the command they obey.”

My brother then pointed at the violet capes marked with blue and yellow crosses. Lady Letizia was the only one sitting in the seats for Ahrensbach’s archducal family. She had not yet enrolled at the Academy, so her being here meant she was still considered an archducal family member.

“Do you believe Lord Ferdinand will respect Lady Letizia’s place in the royal decree?” I asked.

“Who can say? If he and Rozemyne stick to it, then their adopted daughter will sow discord in their new duchy. If they ignore it entirely, their engagement will cease to exist. For now, their safest course of action would be to at least *act* like they’re following orders.”

There were countless men who wished to be Lady Rozemyne’s husband, considering the influence she would soon have over the new Zent, and many Ahrensbach nobles surely feared that their duchy would turn into a vassal state of Ehrenfest with Lady Rozemyne and Lord Ferdinand in charge. Top-ranking duchies would also be compelled to interfere with the birth of a greater duchy subservient to Ehrenfest.

“These are troubling times, dear brother, but I suspect Lord Ferdinand thought this through at least as much as you did. He considers every outcome and devises schemes for each of them. I shuddered in awe when I saw it with my own eyes.”

I tried to relate the matter to our true ditter match with Ehrenfest, but Lestilaut raised a hand. “No more,” he said. “Enough people have told me already.”

“She is correct, Lestilaut,” Mother interjected, then lowered her

voice enough that it would blend in with the buzz of the other nobles. “Though it was probably Lord Ferdinand who proposed the idea, Lady Eglantine agreed to give Lady Rozemyne her name to obtain the Gruttrissheit. Obtaining royal decrees from her is going to be trivial, and at no point will Lady Rozemyne need to worry about royal interference.”

Lestilaut scrunched up his face. “Ferdinand used the Gruttrissheit as a bargaining chip to force the new Zent to give her name? Once again, I am reminded why we started calling him the Lord of Evil. It is a miracle that his heart has not turned entirely to stone.”

I agree.

It was then that a bell chimed, indicating third bell and the start of the ceremony. The doors were opened wide, and the audience immediately fell silent.

Like during the graduation and coming-of-age ceremonies, the stage and altar were set up in the auditorium. First entered the musicians with their instruments, who would carry out the same role as the graduating students during the Academy’s graduation ceremonies and play songs for the gods. I narrowed my eyes and managed to spot Lady Rozemyne’s auburn-haired personal musician among them; she had played for us during tea parties.

The doors closed, and the next group to come in was the blue priests. They arrived through the same entrance the professors normally used. I recognized some of those taking the lead.

“That is Hartmut at the front,” I said.

“Aah, yes. Clarissa’s fiancé. How strange it feels to recognize Ehrenfest’s High Priest from ceremonies at the Royal Academy.”

We had seen Hartmut more during the Archduke Conference and the Royal Academy’s Dedication Ritual than we had seen those of the Sovereign temple. I could not imagine anyone else leading the Academy’s ceremonies.

Dressed in blue robes, Hartmut passed the stage for dedication whirling and stopped in front of the altar. He looked around, confirming that the blue priests were properly in place, then leisurely regarded the audience and produced a sound-amplifying magic tool.

“Now behold the Zent chosen by the Divine Avatar of Mestionora: Lady Eglantine.”

We turned to the door just in time to see it open, revealing the

woman in question. She wore an elegant smile and entered with Prince Anastasius as her escort. The light of a blessing rained down on them out of seemingly nowhere.

“Oh my! A blessing!”

“The gods have blessed her like they did during her graduation!”

Lady Eglantine and Prince Anastasius were both wearing the same clothes they had worn for their graduation, which must have made the parallel even more obvious. The light shimmering around our ruler-to-be was like a window into the past. I recalled the Sovereign High Bishop at the time enthusiastically declaring that it was a blessing from the gods, and indeed, the spectacle convinced us all that they had chosen Lady Eglantine as their new Zent.

Her golden hair tied loosely behind her head, Lady Eglantine strode gracefully through the auditorium as the blessing continued to rain down upon her. Perhaps because she would henceforth serve as the country’s new Zent, her usual gentle demeanor had vanished, replaced with something much sharper. Prince Anastasius’s stern expression likewise conveyed the weight of the role now awaiting his beloved wife.

Lestilaut was impatiently drumming his fingers on the wooden barrier that separated us from the royals below. So majestic was the sight before us that he must have wanted to capture it in a picture.

Only once Lady Eglantine had reached the front of the stage and came to a stop did Hartmut make his next announcement: “Now behold Lady Rozemyne, Divine Avatar of Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom.”

I returned my attention to the door and watched it closely. Mother and Father had described the impact of Lady Rozemyne’s divine power, but this was my chance to see it with my own eyes.

She radiates divinity and authority—that was how my parents described it. I cannot even begin to imagine how that must look. The divine power will apparently fade in time, so I am quite glad to have this chance to see it.

“Oho, so that is the divine avatar...”

“How beautiful!”

Lady Eglantine had wowed us all with the blessing she’d received, but Lady Rozemyne’s entrance was truly breathtaking. She stepped into the auditorium with Lord Ferdinand as her escort, radiating light and a gentle swell of divine power. I could feel it

even from the audience seats and was struck with an instinctual impulse to simply stare at her in awe.

I am shocked that Lord Ferdinand can still escort her.

Even if Lady Rozemyne had looked exactly the same as before, standing that close to her would invariably have compelled me to kneel. The same was true of my parents. This was but another way in which Lord Ferdinand stood out as abnormal.

“This is not at all how I remember Lady Rozemyne...”

“I refuse to believe this was all the result of a growth spurt.”

I nodded along with the chattering of the crowd.

Yes, I was speechless the first time I saw her adult form. I thought I would never lose to her in height, but then she suddenly overtook me! My brother retorted that she was far from the first person to tower over me, but that completely missed the point. Someone, please understand my woe!

“Lady Rozemyne’s feystones are shining with her,” Mother observed.

I returned to my senses and enhanced my vision. Lady Rozemyne’s brilliance was due to more than just the divine power—the rainbow feystones attached to her ornaments were all positively radiant. They clinked melodically and twinkled like stars as she proceeded through the room. I could not even begin to guess how many ornaments she had concealed under her white robes, but multicolor light bled through her sleeves and made the shape of her arms faintly visible. Even just looking at their jewelry, it was clear that Lady Rozemyne, the Divine Avatar of Mestionora, ranked above Lady Eglantine.

Lady Rozemyne’s dark hair swayed with each step. Her tresses had the blessing of the God of Darkness, and her eyes contained the blessing of the Goddess of Light—the night sky and two golden moons, making her features exactly like how Mestionora’s were rumored to appear. Now that Lady Rozemyne had taken a form befitting her age, courtesy of Anwachs the God of Growth, there was no dissonance with calling her a true divine avatar.

And only ten days have passed since we parted ways after the fighting in Ehrenfest.

I was amazed that someone could change so dramatically in such a short time. We were both girls, and it was far from my first time seeing her grown-up form, but I was still very nearly enraptured with her. Those not used to her would completely lose

themselves.

I glanced once again at my brother, who had not uttered a single word since Lady Rozemyne's arrival. His eyes were wide open, and his mouth hung agape. I could tell that he was stunned because his fingers remained completely still, no longer tracing images on the barrier. He was staring at Lady Rozemyne in a desperate attempt to burn the sight of her into his memory.

"Just recently, the Goddess of Wisdom descended into Lady Rozemyne's body. I assume each and every one of you can feel the lingering sway of her divine mana," Lady Eglantine said to the nobles, her voice made louder by the tool she had taken from Hartmut. She conveyed a message from the gods, then touched briefly upon our war against the Lanzenavians. "The details shall be given during the Archduke Conference. Today, the Divine Avatar of Mestionora will return to us the Grutrisheit we so shamefully lost."

On cue, Lord Ferdinand escorted Lady Rozemyne up the whirling stage. No sooner did she step foot atop it than a magic circle sprang to life—the same circle that had appeared only momentarily for Lady Detlinde.

"This long-forgotten circle, which dates back to ancient times, responds to those worthy of becoming Zent candidates," Lord Ferdinand explained. "Anyone whose whirling does not open the path to the gods will not be considered. We hope to give the children gathered today a chance to receive Mestionora's wisdom and to recognize the importance of religious ceremonies and praying to the gods."

He then let go of Lady Rozemyne's hand and descended to the front of the stage, where he joined the musicians and readied his harspiel.

"Oh my. Does Lord Ferdinand intend to play?"

"He is with the musicians. That must be the case."

Lord Ferdinand strummed a few notes, ensuring his harspiel was in tune with the other instruments. They were ready to begin. Lady Rozemyne must have noticed as much because she knelt upon the cylindrical stage and prayed.

"I am one who offers prayer and gratitude to the gods who have created the world..."

The musicians played their instruments, and Lord Ferdinand started to sing. A sound-amplifying tool carried his voice throughout the auditorium.

Atop the stage, Lady Rozemyne slowly raised her head and stood as smoothly as if she were ethereal. She stretched her arms out to her sides and gazed up at the distant heavens. Tiny rainbow feystones on the backs of her hands drew elegant arcs in the air as she whirled.

“May the gods receive our prayers,” she intoned, and thus began the whirl of a goddess heretofore unseen. Not a single eye strayed from her performance.

A pillar of light...

The magic circle shone even brighter, and seven appropriately colored columns rose from the primary gods’ sigils. They ascended in time with Lady Rozemyne’s spinning and the billowing of her sleeves.

“The statues on the altar are moving...” Father muttered.

I turned to look and saw that he was right—the statues of the gods were moving on their own, forming a way to the top.

Is that the path to the gods?

It was now common knowledge that performing religious ceremonies at the Royal Academy caused pillars of light to appear. Seeing the statues on the altar move, however, was entirely new to me.

“This did not happen during the Academy’s other ceremonies,” I replied.

“According to Lady Rozemyne, it normally opens during the divine protections ritual. Perhaps a single Zent candidate must supply the circle.”

As I continued a hushed conversation with my father, the pillars stopped growing. The stage must have been filled with Lady Rozemyne’s divine power. They hung in the air for a moment before trickling down upon the room, creating bright waves that raced up the red cloth to the shrine. I was reminded of the Dedication Ritual, and the divine instruments lit up one by one.

Once the instruments all shone, Lady Rozemyne knelt and did not move. Her dance had enraptured me so completely that I could not even process it was over.

“Praise be to the gods.”

Her voice reverberated through the auditorium, and the divine instruments all flashed at once. In the blink of an eye, Lady Rozemyne was nowhere to be seen.

“She vanished!”

“What’s going on?!”

As the audience stirred, the statues of the gods moved again, returning to their original posts. The magic circle and radiant columns disappeared, and everything returned to normal. It was like nothing had even happened.

“This is just like what occurred during the battle for the auditorium...” Father murmured. He had mentioned during his report that the statues had shone and the three people atop the altar had vanished. I was surprised to have witnessed the same scene.

Oh...? But this time, Lord Ferdinand was not taken with her.

I peered down at the stage and saw him among the musicians. He had put down his harpsiel and risen to his feet, his eyes locked on the shrine.

“Rozemyne was invited to the Garden of Beginnings,” Ferdinand announced. “Lady Eglantine, if you would. The gods are waiting.”

Our future Zent nodded and ascended the stage, the blood gone from her face. How cruel it was to make her whirl after Lady Rozemyne.

“Though it is her duty as a Zent candidate to perform, it cannot be easy being compared to Lady Rozemyne...” I said under my breath.

Lestilaut scoffed. “It won’t be long before you’re in the same predicament. Won’t you need to whirl alongside her for your graduation ceremony?”

“Oh...”

It would seem my timing hasn’t improved in the slightest.

The magic circle returned not immediately upon Lady Eglantine taking the stage but gradually as she put her hands against it and prayed. Sighs of awe and relief came from her spectators; they must have been glad to know that one did not need to radiate divine power to activate the Zent-selecting circle.

We were all too enchanted to breathe when Lady Rozemyne did it.

Again, the musicians started to play. I noticed the volume was lower than before and that someone else was singing this time. A quick glance revealed an empty seat with a harpsiel resting beside it.

Lord Ferdinand must have left.

He had sung so beautifully during Lady Rozemyne’s performance, but now he was gone, neither among the musicians

nor atop the stage. I thought to ask my brother about it, but he was too focused on Lady Eglantine's dance.

My voice would only fall on deaf ears.

I tried to put Lord Ferdinand out of my mind and instead joined my brother in watching Lady Eglantine perform. Her dance lacked the ethereal divinity of the previous act but was wonderful nonetheless. Had we judged them on technique alone, she would certainly have come out on top.

The magic circle grew as Lady Eglantine whirled, as did the same bright columns. My stomach churned when the statues refused to budge, and while they did eventually move near the very end of her performance, the worst was yet to come—even after finishing her dance and praying to the gods, she remained atop the stage.

"She didn't vanish... Does that mean she failed...?"

"No, the gods atop the shrine seem to be inviting her..."

Worried murmurs spread that Lady Eglantine had not been recognized as a true Zent candidate. In the midst of their dread, Hartmut stepped forward and pointed to the top of the shrine.

"The path to the gods has opened," he announced. "Lady Eglantine—the gods await."

She had not disappeared, but the path having opened meant she had received the gods' approval. A wave of relief washed over the room.

Lady Eglantine raised her head, stood, and then turned toward the shrine. She seemed more charming than ever now that she had opened the path to the gods and proven her worth as a Zent candidate.

Prince Anastasius ascended the stage and took his wife's hand. He tried to escort her all the way to the top of the shrine but only made it so far before he was stopped by a hidden barrier. Lady Eglantine had to proceed alone.

"I suppose only those who complete the ritual can ascend the shrine..." I whispered.

"Or only those deemed worthy of becoming the next Zent," Father replied. There was an unmistakable weight to his observation, like he wanted me to read between the lines, but I was unsure what he was alluding to.

Lady Eglantine passed the statues of the supreme gods, which were now facing each other, and continued through the entrance atop the shrine. No sooner had she disappeared than the statues

returned to their original positions.

“Ooh...”

Young and old, this transference ceremony was a new experience for us all. Awed murmurs once again spread through the room.

“That was truly a splendid dedication whirl,” one said. “I would never have guessed that a dance performed during one’s graduation served such a remarkable purpose. I wondered what the Academy was thinking when it held those Dedication Rituals, but I see now that the gods must have desired them.”

“So this is how power was transferred in ancient times...” mused another. “I feel blessed to have seen an avatar of Mestionora with my own eyes and to have experienced her divine power.”

“I was doubtful when she was first referred to as a divine avatar, but after seeing her in person, I agree that there is no better descriptor.”

Nearly everyone was talking about Lady Rozemyne. On the odd occasion that Lady Eglantine was mentioned, it was only to describe her as a “safe choice” for the throne, since she had the divine avatar’s approval.

Lestilaut sighed. “I suspect they meant to demonstrate that a divine avatar holds more status than the new Zent, but still... I wish they had whirled in the opposite order.”

I agreed. Lady Eglantine’s dance was superb. She had successfully activated the circle, created pillars of light, and moved the statues. Had she been first to dance, the audience would surely have been moved by the birth of a new Zent. Instead, she had needed to follow an even more mystical performance by Lady Rozemyne.

“Lord Ferdinand remarked that things seldom go to plan when Lady Rozemyne is involved...” Mother said. “It would seem he was correct.”

“Hmm? Something went wrong?” I asked.

She gave a troubled smile, and the empty chair among the musicians returned to my mind. I gazed around the room, worried, but could not see Lord Ferdinand anywhere. My attention moved next to Lady Rozemyne’s retainers, who were watching from Ahrensbach’s seats. Some of them had vanished as well.

As my thoughts ran rampant, Hartmut, Lady Rozemyne’s vassal, started praying atop the stage. Nothing about his countenance

indicated an abrupt change of schedule or a reason to fret about Lady Rozemyne or Lord Ferdinand.

I watched the shrine, but the statues did not move again. Perhaps neither Lady Rozemyne nor Lady Eglantine would return from their audience with the gods. I grew more and more anxious while the other nobles rejoiced at the birth of a new Zent.

“Silence!” Hartmut shouted, his voice cutting through the buzz of the room. “The new Zent and Lady Rozemyne, the Divine Avatar of Mestionora, return!”

The statues moved at last, and the path to the gods opened once more. The entire auditorium went silent as we all gazed up at the topmost level of the shrine. Lady Eglantine returned first, then Lady Rozemyne. The latter’s abrupt disappearance had made me skeptical that they had both received the same invitation, but seeing them together blew the last doubts from my mind.

Lady Eglantine took Lady Rozemyne by the hand, and together they descended the shrine. The divine power radiating from Lady Rozemyne felt even stronger than before.

“Ngh...” Lestilaut groaned. “Why was I denied my utensils?!”

“Because it would seem rude—and perhaps even blasphemous—if you started drawing during this most holy of ceremonies,” I replied. He was so desperate to capture this moment on paper that I feared he might do something embarrassing.

“It seems even more blasphemous to leave this ceremony unpainted. I must return to my room at once and—”

Lestilaut had tried to stand when Mother gave him an icy smile. “I will permit you to leave in silence, but the ceremony has not concluded,” she said. “Would it not be *most* blasphemous to miss the passing of the Grutrissheit, the most wonderful part of our being here? Of course, if you continue to act in a manner that will shame us, I will send you out whether you want it or not.”

He sat back down and took a deep breath. Mother had an intense look in her eye that said, “Keep quiet if you want to see the rest of the ceremony.”

“So my only choice is to burn the sight into my memory...” my brother concluded. “Very well. I was born for this.” He kept his eyes as wide as they would go and stared intently at Lady Eglantine and Lady Rozemyne. I was struck with the urge to scoot to the far edge of my seat.

Mother! For everyone’s sake, have him escorted out immediately!



We all watched as the two women gracefully descended the shrine. The divine power radiating from Lady Rozemyne was even more intense than before, but Lady Eglantine weathered it with a smile.

“That she can hold Lady Rozemyne’s hand without being overwhelmed proves her might as the next Zent,” I remarked.

“It proves she has the damning resolve to take the throne,” Father added. He spoke harshly and looked especially solemn.

Once again, I sensed that circumstances beyond my understanding were at play. I deduced that Lady Eglantine could endure Lady Rozemyne’s divine power not because she was the next Zent but because she had made a great sacrifice of some kind.

The pair soon made it down to where Hartmut and the other blue priests were lined up. Hartmut approached Lady Rozemyne and held a sound-amplifying magic tool close to her mouth.

“O Zent, blessed by the gods, declare your loyalty to the Goddess of Light, ruler of contracts. *Beleuchkrone*.”

In the blink of an eye, the Goddess of Light’s crown appeared in Lady Rozemyne’s hands. Lady Eglantine knelt before her, further demonstrating that the Divine Avatar of Mestionora held greater authority than even the country’s ruler.

Lady Rozemyne placed the crown atop Lady Eglantine’s bowed head and took a step back. Hartmut presented the sound-amplifying tool to our soon-to-be new Zent, who accepted it and made her vows to the gods.

“I, Eglantine, hereby swear to the Goddess of Light and the twelve subordinates who serve by her side to correct the distortions that have taken root in Yurgenschmidt, to revive old rituals as the Sovereign temple’s High Bishop, and to keep my promises to Lady Rozemyne, the Divine Avatar of Mestionora.”

The crown burst with light. Lady Eglantine had made an inescapable contract with the gods.

Lady Rozemyne dispelled the divine instrument while Hartmut retrieved the sound-amplifying tool from Lady Eglantine. Once again, he held it up to the divine avatar’s mouth.

“He let Lady Eglantine hold the tool so why not Lady Rozemyne?” my brother grumbled, his face twisted in a grimace. “He is in the way.” He wished to memorize the divine beauty of the

two women and so found even the slightest obstruction infuriating.

“He can’t let Lady Rozemyne touch it,” Father explained. “She can’t control goddess-dyed mana as she would normal mana and will turn most feystones to dust in an instant.”

Our jaws dropped.

“Would that not impede her day-to-day life?” I asked. It had never occurred to me that Lady Rozemyne was enduring such a great hardship.

My father did not answer. He moved a finger slightly to indicate the shrine and said, “Stay focused. She is about to give Lady Eglantine the Grutrissheit.”

Lestilaut and I turned at once. Lady Rozemyne waited for Hartmut to move the magic tool into position, then made a new declaration.

“In the Garden of Beginnings, the gods recognized Lady Eglantine as the new Zent. Now that she is oath-bound to the Goddess of Light, I shall bestow the Grutrissheit upon her.”

Hartmut lowered the tool at once. Lady Rozemyne raised her right arm up toward the ceiling, turned her schtappe into a pen, and then elegantly drew a magic circle in the air with her mana.

“What is that magic circle? I do not recognize it...”

“It looks omni-elemental. Few people could activate it so easily.”

As another stir ran through the auditorium, Lady Rozemyne started to pray. We had to strain our ears to hear her; Hartmut had elected not to hold up the magic tool and was instead simply watching her with pride.

“O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies...”

The magic circle began to shine, and darkness hemmed the light. Everyone regarded it with awe, and the whispers faded as the entire room tried to hear what Lady Rozemyne was saying.

“O mighty Eternal Five who rule the mortal realm. O Goddess of Water Flutrane, O God of Fire Leidenschaft, O Goddess of Wind Schutzaria, O Goddess of Earth Geduldh, O God of Life Ewigeliebe...”

Each time she spoke one of the gods’ names, mana flowed out of her schtappe and caused the relevant sigil on the magic circle to shine.

“Please hear my prayer and graciously lend your blessings. I offer you my power and devote to you my service and gratitude.

May your divine protection be granted to the new Zent—the power of Water that washes away corruption, of Fire that cannot be extinguished, of Wind that wards against danger, of Earth that embraces all, and of Life that never relents. May she have them one and all.”

Rainbow light rained down upon Lady Eglantine as she knelt. It was my first time seeing an omni-elemental blessing, and the sight was so divine that I gasped despite myself.

Soon enough, the light of the blessing stopped. Lady Rozemyne turned to Hartmut. She must have had more to say because he once again brought the magic tool to her mouth.

“Lady Eglantine, let all see the Grutrisheit and witness that you are the Zent.”

Lady Rozemyne took a step back. The light we had just witnessed must have been for bestowing the Grutrisheit upon our new Zent. I directed my attention to Lady Eglantine, eager to see it, but her hands appeared to be empty.

I was starting to worry when Lady Eglantine rose to her feet, looking not the least bit troubled. She placed both hands on her chest and shouted out for all to hear.

“Grutrisheit!”

In an instant, a thick tome appeared in her arms. She thrust it up into the air so that everyone could see it.

“Ooh!”

“The real Grutrisheit!”

“The Divine Avatar of Mestionora gave Lady Eglantine the Grutrisheit!”

Every noble in Yurgenschmidt had anxiously awaited the return of the Grutrisheit. And now that Lady Eglantine had acquired it, the country had a true Zent once more. I gazed upon Lady Rozemyne, such a dear friend of mine, and a sudden warmth spread through my chest. Fresh tears blurred my vision.

“This is just wonderful...” I said.

I was focused not on Lady Eglantine but on the divine avatar standing a pace behind her. Lady Rozemyne wore a calm smile and looked far more beautiful than I could put into words.

“Now, everyone...” Hartmut said, overcome with emotion. “By the grace of Lady Rozemyne, the Divine Avatar of Mestionora, a true Zent has taken the throne. Let us show gratitude to the mighty King and Queen of the endless skies, the Eternal Five who rule the

mortal realm, Flutrane the Goddess of Water, Leidenschaft the God of Fire, Schutzaria the Goddess of Wind, Geduldh the Goddess of Earth, and Ewigeliebe the God of Life. Let us give our prayers to the gods!”

A chair clattered as Hartmut spoke. I turned in the direction of the noise and saw Melchior standing in his High Bishop robes. Following his lead, some of the Ehrenfest and Ahrensbach nobles rose to their feet as well.

“Wh-What are they doing?” I asked. “Should we stand too?”

“I do not know.”

We were taken aback. They had risen with such conviction that we started to doubt ourselves.

“Let us give our prayers to the gods!” the standing nobles declared. Then, together with Lady Rozemyne, Hartmut, and the blue priests, they shot both arms into the air and raised one leg in prayer. The light of a blessing radiated not just from Lady Rozemyne but from the audience as well.

I can understand the Ehrenfest nobles rising in prayer, but why are those from Ahrensbach joining them?!

It was shocking to see them all on the same page.

“Lady Rozemyne and Lady Eglantine shall now depart,” Hartmut announced. “Raise your schtappes high for them!”

We did exactly as instructed. Prince Anastasius and Lord Ferdinand approached the altar and then escorted Lady Eglantine and Lady Rozemyne out of the auditorium. Lights clashed as the new Zent and the avatar of a goddess gracefully made their exit. The blue priests closed the door behind them, concluding an event that would forever change how society viewed the temple and religious ceremonies.

“It was so long ago that Lady Rozemyne urged us to reevaluate the temple,” I said. “Now this feels like a matter of course.”

We prepared to stand, but Hartmut instructed us to remain seated. “Now that a new Zent has arisen, there is much that will need to be decided during the upcoming Archduke Conference,” he said. “Lord Trauerqual shall explain.”

King—no, *Lord*—Trauerqual blinked several times, then slowly stood and approached the altar. He looked terribly unwell, as one might expect for a man just ousted from power. Upon reaching Hartmut, he accepted the sound-amplifying magic tool and started addressing the gathered aubs about Lanzenave and Ahrensbach’s

insurrection.

“Before today’s triumphs—the long-awaited return of the Grutrissheit and the installation of a true Zent—much took place behind the scenes.”

He gave a public-facing interpretation of the revolt, then moved on to discussing the Archduke Conference. Every one of the aubs gave him their full attention; until now, they had been kept mostly in the dark.

He seems to be concealing most of the royal family’s involvement.

My father and mother had already summarized the situation for me, but still. As someone who had actually fought against Lanzenave in Ahrensbach, I could not help feeling that events were being twisted in favor of royalty while simultaneously minimizing the involvement of those from Ehrenfest.

This might be Lady Rozemyne’s wish, but even so...

Lord Trauerqual announced that the Lanzenavians and any Ahrensbach nobles who aided them would need to be punished, that some of the duchies’ borders were being redrawn in preparation for the Archduke Conference, and that the duchy rankings would change drastically as a result.

“This could have waited until the Archduke Conference,” Lestilaut groused. “Can I not just return to my room?”

“Pay attention,” I shot back, my tone chastising. “This is important information for the next Aub Dunkelfelger.”

From there, Lord Trauerqual announced that he and Lord Sigiswald were going to become aubs and that Lady Rozemyne would free Ahrensbach from the sway of Chaocipher the Goddess of Chaos, bestowing upon the duchy a new name and color in the process. Only then were we permitted to leave.

My brother practically shot out of the room with his retainers in tow. Mother watched them go with a look of resignation, then hurried me along as well.

It was then that Eineliebe, my brother’s fiancée, approached us. She was due to marry him during the upcoming Archduke Conference but had not been able to sit with us, as she was still only an archnoble.

“Lady Sieglinde,” she said as she watched my brother depart, “about Lord Lestilaut...”

“He will not leave his room for quite some time, I suspect. How troubling.”

“I understand why he is so stimulated—the ceremony was more splendid than any other I have witnessed—but still... I cannot help but wonder how many new paintings will come of this.”

Hearing her sound so defeated, I was suddenly compelled to apologize in my brother’s place. Anyone would hate the thought of their husband-to-be obsessively making artwork of other women.

“Um, Eineliebe...” I said.

“Worry not, Lady Hannelore—I shall consult Lady Sieglinde when it comes time to drag him from his room. If he makes only one or two pictures, I will not complain, but alas... As soon as inspiration strikes him, he seems to forget that he is Dunkelfelger’s next aub.”

Eineliebe was much too good for Lestilaut. If my brother had any sense left in him, he would start showing his eternal gratitude to her and to our mother, who had put them together in the first place.

Lestilaut was already locked away in his room by the time we returned to the dormitory. I asked my attendants to prepare tea in the common room, where I discussed the ceremony with my parents. Those who had not been too involved in recent events remarked on the grandeur of the spectacle and on Lady Rozemyne’s divine grace, and we exchanged intelligence on subjects we thought were likely to come up during the Archduke Conference.

“To think they were so desperate to buy time that they made some of their announcements early...” Mother said. “I wonder what happened.”

“I don’t have a clue,” Father replied. “I didn’t become the Zent, so it’s of no concern to me.”

Their remarks were almost lost among the excited chatter, but they did not escape my notice.

Vows and the Garden of Beginnings

“Eglantine, I implore you to reconsider!” Anastasius exclaimed. “Are you truly comfortable with your choice? The nobles of other duchies have yet to be informed; if you’ve changed your mind, now is your only chance to say so.”

We had just concluded a meeting in the Ehrenfest Dormitory and were now back in our villa. Anastasius held my hand and spoke in a low, almost threatening voice, but his eyes betrayed nothing but concern for me. Even if my resolve to become the next Zent crumbled, he would go to any length to protect me.

“You don’t wish to take the throne, do you?” my husband continued. “You were openly against the idea both when we were engaged and when we ordered Rozemyne to circle the shrines.” He must have thought I had suddenly changed my tune—or that I had been lying to him from the start.

I took his hand in both of mine. “Before now, avoiding the throne was the best way to prevent another war.”

Striving to rule Yurgenschmidt would have violated the promise we made to cede the throne to Prince Sigiswald. Tensions between Klassenberg and Drewanchel would have risen, as the former would have wanted me to become the Zent, and the latter had agreed to marry Lady Adolphine to the first prince because he was in place to take the throne.

“We had other options back then,” I stressed. “Of course I opted for them.”

In terms of obtaining the Grutrissheit, Lady Rozemyne was already far ahead of me. I wanted nothing more than to preserve the peace, and in that regard, it had made the most sense to adopt her into the royal family and secure the holy book through her. If we had arranged a marriage between her and the next Zent—at the time, Prince Sigiswald—then the entire situation would have been neatly resolved.

“That side of you is why Rozemyne accused the royal family of taking someone dear to her hostage,” Anastasius said.

“Oh my. But any noble would behave in such a way, not just a royal. Is it really so uncommon to exploit another’s weakness to guarantee their cooperation? Lady Rozemyne took the same approach with us.”

“Eglantine...” my husband said, a bitter expression forming on his face.

Anastasius’s reaction intrigued me. There were plenty of examples one could turn to, and my very own love life was among them. Aub Klassenberg and my grandfather had forced me to choose between Prince Sigiswald and my current husband, refusing me the opportunity to even consider other men. Their actions had denied me any chance of escape.

And yet Lady Rozemyne fought tooth and nail to escape her predicament. Most admirable.

Before her adoption, she had obtained the Book of Mestionora and claimed another duchy to save Lord Ferdinand, thereby ensuring she would not become the Zent. She had even acquired more status than our family by becoming the avatar of a goddess before she was due to give me the Grutrissheit.

I regret only that nobody else in the royal family was resolved and capable enough to accept it.

King Trauerqual had refused the Grutrissheit on the grounds of his performance during the recent war. Anastasius had lacked the elements to wield it. And as for Prince Sigiswald, he had refused to swear loyalty to Lady Rozemyne.

“Despite having the power to eliminate us, Lady Rozemyne and Lord Ferdinand resisted their impulses, saved our lives, and went on to forge the most peaceful path for Yurgenschmidt’s future. We had no choice in the matter—not when our daughter was on the line—but I take no issue with preventing another war.”

Anastasius’s eyes widened. I cocked my head in response. Were my words really so shocking to him?

“My views have not changed,” I said, “merely my situation. My thoughts, feelings, and the things I aspire to—everything about me is the same. I have simply decided that becoming the Zent will resolve this situation more peacefully than anything else.”

“I see...” Anastasius muttered, calmer than before. He sensed that he would not be able to stop me and gave a defeated smile.

“They might have paved this path for me, but I tread it of my own volition,” I continued. “Though... it still makes me anxious, I

must admit.”

I released Anastasius’s hand. No matter how much he decried it, I would take the throne—both to protect our daughter and to prevent another war from tearing through Yurgenschmidt. I could not think of a better solution.

“And what are your thoughts on the matter?” I asked. “Am I, um... not as you remember me?”

Before I could even emphasize that this was his only chance to divorce me, he took my hand and squeezed it tight. “I, too, remain the same. I will do whatever it takes—give up whatever I must—to remain your husband. I shall dance to their tune just to be beside you.” He raised a teasing eyebrow. “No matter how much it might frustrate me.”

I could not help but laugh. His wry remark reminded me how much he had complained about Lord Ferdinand making him complete all manner of tasks despite his status as a royal.

“You will soon be married to the Zent,” I said. “Your struggles will continue for some time.”

We gazed into each other’s eyes and then laughed together. It put me at ease to know I would not be marching down this path alone.

“Anastasius, I wish to become a Zent who does everything in her power to prevent war—who stands in opposition to the pain and death it causes.”

I approached the transference ceremony with that resolve, but what on earth is going on here?

The situation was beyond any of our expectations. Lady Rozemyne had disappeared upon completing her dedication whirl. She had not beat a hasty retreat—she had quite literally vanished into thin air.

Lord Ferdinand, while hidden from view, had instructed me to perform a dedication whirl of my own. My heart pounded at the thought of the shrine not opening for me, but the statues eventually moved aside to create a path. I ascended toward it, acting as though this were all part of our plan, and soon arrived at the Garden of Beginnings.

Inside this vast expanse of white—the same place where I had obtained my schtappe—I found Lady Rozemyne writhing on the ground, resisting some unseen force while Lord Ferdinand

attempted to restrain her. She twisted and kicked her legs, letting her skirt slide up to her knees.

"It hurts... Gaaah!"

"I understand, but you must stay still."

We were lucky to have found Lady Rozemyne, but I was too stunned to feel relieved. It looked entirely like Lord Ferdinand was enacting some crude violence upon her. The unexpected scene made my head spin.

There... There must be an explanation for this.

"Um, Lord Ferdinand, Lady Rozemyne... Was this really worth interrupting the transference ceremony?" I asked timidly.

Lord Ferdinand, seemingly at his wits' end, asked me to assist him in removing Lady Rozemyne's charms. She was on the brink of death, he explained, and the only way to save her was to allow Mestionora back into her body.

Excuse me?! This is all too sudden!

I was glad to know Lord Ferdinand had not given in to desire, but the truth was even more harrowing. I had just given Lady Rozemyne my name; if she ascended to the distant heights, I would be going with her.

"Aah! Hurts...!"

"Lady Rozemyne," I said, "you must not move your arms around."

It was hard to remove Lady Rozemyne's elaborate ornaments when she would not stop squirming and screaming. Each time I pulled up her sleeves, searching for the clasps I would need to undo, she swung her arms and obscured my vision with billowing cloth.

"Could you keep her arm in place?" I asked. "I cannot find the clasp. Take her wrist like this, and..."

"Like this?"

I instructed Lord Ferdinand on how to keep Lady Rozemyne still and eventually managed to remove her ornaments. They were beautiful and covered with tiny rainbow feystones.

No sooner had the ornaments come away—they landed on the ground with a light clatter—than light rained down from above and enveloped Lady Rozemyne like a cocoon. It was nothing like the divine power radiating from her. More than anything else, I was stunned to see that I had not been deceived; a goddess genuinely had descended.

The light surrounding Lady Rozemyne then leisurely ascended into the air. I sighed, taken with the divine sight, while Lord Ferdinand rose to his feet.

“Lady Eglantine, take your distance and kneel,” he said. “The goddess smites those who are insolent.”

Are you speaking from experience?

Now that Gervasio was absent, Lord Ferdinand was the only one who had experienced Mestionora’s previous descent. I took his advice, stepped back, and went down on one knee as he did.

“The original purpose of the Zent was to mediate between mankind and the gods,” Ferdinand informed me. “Take care not to be overly obedient. Do not make undue promises that will distort society as we know it.”

I swallowed dryly. In my mind, the Zent was simply the person who ruled Yurgenschmidt; their purpose was to balance the needs and wishes of each duchy while providing the entire country with mana. The desires of the gods had never factored into it.

That must be even more lost knowledge.

Only a Zent with the Grutrisheit could carry out their purpose—that was something I would need to remember. By receiving the holy book from Mestionora’s divine avatar, I would accept the burdens of the throne until the day came for me to pass the torch on to a new generation of Zent candidates, who would obtain their Books of Mestionora through their own power.

The ways of the gods and the ways of men... Two cultures, worlds apart.

There was so little that I understood. I was studying the ancient language, but my knowledge of the deities was mediocre at best; some things had to be seen to be believed. Considering that I would soon become the Zent, it was perhaps a blessing that I was here to witness the descent of the goddess.

“Quinta, what have you done to Erwaermen?” Mestionora asked immediately upon taking Lady Rozemyne’s form.

Erwaermen? From what I remember, he was a subordinate of Ewigeliebe who earned the God of Life’s ire for protecting Mestionora and Geduldh’s subordinates. Was he the former god who became Yurgenschmidt’s core? And who is Quinta...?

I searched my memories as best I could, unable to hide my shock that a name I had encountered only in lectures and old books had come up so naturally in conversation. Judging by the anger in

Mestionora's voice, Lord Ferdinand must have done something to Erwaermen. I continued to kneel, holding my breath and staring intently at the white ground while I awaited his response.

"First, tell me what the gods have done to Rozemyne," Lord Ferdinand said. "How convenient that only the descent of a goddess could keep her from the distant heights."

That is not how you answer a goddess!

I stared quizzically at the pair. Lord Ferdinand was still on one knee, but he raised his head and glared into Mestionora's eyes.

"Goodness," she replied. "As insolent as ever, I see. It is such a terrible shame that Terza never returned. He was far better suited to becoming a Zent than you or Myne." She was not even attempting to hide the regret in her voice.

I furrowed my brow. The goddess had mentioned even more names that were unknown to me, but one did not need expert powers of deduction to realize she meant Lord Ferdinand, Lady Rozemyne, and Lord Gervasio.

I wonder why they have secondary names. Is one given a special title upon receiving the Book of Mestionora?

Unsure what to think, I could only stay silent as the debate between man and goddess continued.

"The moment I arrived," Lord Ferdinand said, "I was informed that Rozemyne was on the verge of succumbing to the gods' power and that I would need to remove her charms to save her. I do not consider it 'insolent' to ask how she ended up in such peril to begin with."

He spoke politely and continued to kneel, but that did not change the fact he was arguing with the Goddess of Wisdom. I grew dizzy as I pondered whether this counted as sacrilege.

"You would take that tone despite knowing how easily I could dispatch you?"

"Would it really be so easy? Rozemyne wished for my survival and lent you her body at the cost of her most precious memories. Taking my life while using her form would violate a promise made between gods and men."

There were many stories about the breaking of such promises. In each one, the culprit was punished, be they man or god.

I raised my head just enough to see how the goddess would respond. Though she had taken Lady Rozemyne's form, one could tell at a glance that she was not the same person. She levitated in

place, for a start, and exuded the most spectacular light. Her eyes were a brighter gold than those of her host, and simply witnessing their ferocity compelled me to submit. I could not risk meeting her gaze, so I returned to facing the ground.

“How irritating... And if we put Myne’s life on the scales instead? She is important to you, is she not?”

“Rozemyne is too important for the gods to lose. The lives of everyone in Yurgenschmidt capable of reaching the foundation are bound to her.” Lord Ferdinand wore a smile even in the face of a threat from a goddess. He had given his name to Lady Rozemyne—and urged me to do the same—for leverage against the gods. “Moreover, while the gods seem to think Gervasio was suited to becoming the Zent, no one poses a greater threat to Erwaermen and Yurgenschmidt.”

“Oh? I refuse to believe there is anyone more dangerous than you.”

I wanted to concur; Anastasius had told me about the recent battle, and we had both been present for Lady Rozemyne’s meeting with the royal family.

Lord Ferdinand did not even wince at the claim. “It was Gervasio who supplied Yurgenschmidt with this silver weaponry and the poison paralyzing Erwaermen—tools that have already claimed dozens of nobles’ lives. I dread to imagine what he might have done to this country had he not been taken out of the picture.”

“I forbade men from taking each other’s lives.”

“The tools themselves hold no malice. One could devise a way for them to activate simply by being touched, harming or killing someone by accident or through the actions of others.” He had gotten Anastasius to destroy Gervasio’s medal, denying the latter his schtappe and the future he desired, so I could imagine him stooping to such dupery as well.

“Furthermore,” Lord Ferdinand continued, “you did not forbid attacks on Erwaermen.”

“It is beyond mere mortals to harm him.”

“Not with the weaponry Gervasio provided.” Lord Ferdinand swept a hand through the air and threw a silver knife.

I took a sharp breath and instinctively looked up to follow the blade with my eyes. Only then did I notice the large ivory man standing completely immobile. Since coming to the Garden of Beginnings, I had been too focused on Lady Rozemyne’s anguish

and then the descent of a genuine goddess.

“Erwaermen!” Mestionora cried. Thick yellow light shot from her fingertips, but it was no use—the blade passed straight through the goddess’s defenses, tore through some of Erwaermen’s white tresses, and then continued its arc before stabbing into the ground. No sooner had the hairs been severed than they turned into branches, which landed with a clatter.

He really is a tree in human form...

I stared at the fallen branches, feeling entirely out of place. It was far, far beyond me to mediate this dispute. I shrank down and held my breath, desperate not to be drawn into the fray.

“QUINTA!”

“Tell me what the gods did to Rozemyne, how to fully remove the sway of her divine power, and what means other than channeling mana into her will restore her lost memories,” Lord Ferdinand demanded. “In return, I will give Erwaermen the antidote for the poison keeping him frozen.”

Mestionora was forced to nod. “I would rather you not approach Erwaermen ever again, Quinta. Give me the antidote.”

“Not before you provide the information I seek.”

After yet another glaring contest with her rival, Mestionora pointed at me. “Then have Eglantine administer the antidote while I explain.” My attempt to remain hidden had been in vain, but I was more surprised that she knew my name.

Lord Ferdinand approached and placed a small sweet in my hand. “Here. Put this in your mouth before you do anything else. It will protect you from the instant-death poison on Erwaermen.”

From what?!

By this point, I was forced to agree with Mestionora: there was no one more dangerous than Lord Ferdinand. He had used instant-death poison on Erwaermen, the very core of Yurgenschmidt. There was no being more divine or more important to our country’s future.

I was still dazed when Lord Ferdinand gave me a second antidote, this time in the form of a small potion. He explained how to use it and the small sweet.

“First, spray the liquid potion on Erwaermen’s hands. Once he is able to move them, have him drink the rest. I do not know how touching the divine power of the gods would impact you.”

Feeling tense, I accepted the antidote and stood.

Lord Ferdinand and the goddess continued their back-and-forth while I moved closer to Erwaermen. As it turned out, the gods had mistakenly believed that Lady Rozemyne's charms made to prevent Mestionora's descent also obstructed the gods' blessings. They had gone all out in an attempt to break through them, overwhelming Lady Rozemyne with more divine power than a mortal body could contain.

Because she was still dyed with Mestionora's mana from the goddess's previous descent, Lady Rozemyne soon found the gods' blessings violently rebounding within her. To remove the sway of that divine power, she would need to be almost entirely drained of divine mana and then redyed with human mana.

Does the goddess truly want Lord Ferdinand to drain Lady Rozemyne's mana and then dye her with his own? Is she demanding them to put winter before autumn?

It was a troublesome predicament for an underage, unmarried woman to be thrown into, though I supposed the circumstances would not allow for anything untoward. Not to mention, it was clear to everyone who beheld them that Lord Ferdinand and Lady Rozemyne's union was founded in love, not political necessity. If we kept it to ourselves, I suspected no one would mind winter arriving a tad earlier than expected.

Still, to think a goddess's descent would have such severe repercussions.

Many nobles had come to envy Lady Rozemyne for her holy appearance and the divine favor that she and she alone received. Only now was the price of those blessings clear to me.

"If you would excuse me," I said, looking up at Erwaermen. "I must spray this potion on your hands."

The last time I visited this garden, a tall ivory tree had stood where this man remained motionless. He somewhat resembled my grandfather on my father's side—the previous Zent—so I felt strangely close to him.

I sprayed the antidote on Erwaermen's hands, which slowly started to move again. "It would do you well to drink the rest," I said, depositing the potion in his hand.

Erwaermen did as instructed, and the rest of his paralysis faded. "Hmm... Indeed, I can move again. I am shocked that Quinta came here with such dangerous weapons."

"It was Gervasio who brought them into Yurgenschmidt," I

reported. “He used the poison on Ahrensbach and Sovereign nobles. But rather than paralyze them, it turned them into feystones in an instant.”

We had encountered the same poison in the palace and the Royal Academy’s auditorium. It had not taken us by surprise—we had prepared ourselves, even—but some of our own had perished to it nonetheless. Lord Ferdinand obtained the weapons during our battle for the Academy but had not even attempted to use them before now. It was only natural that we Yurgenschmidt nobles felt wary of the Lanzenavians, who had resorted to such lethal means without hesitation.

“I agree that it was dangerous—psychotic, even—for Lord Ferdinand to use instant-death poison against you, but he is right that we could not allow Gervasio to become the Zent. Yurgenschmidt would have seen chaos and war on an unprecedented scale.”

“So those are the circumstances of the world of men...” Erwaermen said. He sighed, then seemed to realize something and quietly asked, “Eglantine, for what purpose have you come here?”

“I received the Grutrissheit from Lady Rozemyne and will soon be crowned the new Zent. My apologies for not mentioning it sooner. I shall restore the bridge that once connected mankind to the gods.”

“How can you claim to be the Zent when you lack the Book of Mestionora? You have neither the mana nor the prayer to be worthy of the role.”

Come again? I am unworthy?

Lord Ferdinand had led me to believe that anyone who received the Grutrissheit from Lady Rozemyne would be recognized as the new Zent. The gods appeared to disagree. I turned to him at once, hoping for an explanation; he had since finished speaking with Mestionora and approached me. The goddess floated leisurely through the air before sitting above Erwaermen’s shoulder.

“Lady Eglantine is a necessary intermediary for us,” Lord Ferdinand declared. “As we discussed before, Zents from the next generation onward will once again be chosen from among those who obtain the Book of Mestionora themselves. She will rule Yurgenschmidt with a Grutrissheit—or a magic tool of one, at least.”

“Goodness, an artificial Grutrissheit?” Mestionora asked, her

tone chastising. “You would repeat the errors of Albsenti?”

I shrank back on instinct. In the presence of a goddess, with my understanding of how the Grutrissheit had come to be inherited, I was intolerably ashamed to be a member of the royal family.

Lord Ferdinand shook his head. “This magic tool was made in such a way that it cannot be passed down. The next Zent will obtain the Book of Mestionora through their own power; we need only buy enough time for the next generation to be raised.”

“The world of men is always so troublesome,” Mestionora said.

Lord Ferdinand picked up something wrapped in silver cloth, then removed the magic rope and sealing feystones that were keeping the cover in place. He took out a sizable bracelet decorated with a large feystone.

“Lady Eglantine,” he said, “please put your hand through this and register your mana with it.”

Registering my mana with the bracelet and casting the appropriate spell would make the Grutrissheit appear in my hands. I could not believe the technological savvy of Zent Albsenti, the inventor of the tool, or Lord Ferdinand, who had made it anew. Their talents were almost inhuman.

“How curious...” I said. “If you were this capable, Lord Ferdinand, then why did *you* not strive to take the throne?”

“For the same reason you avoided it, despite being the only member of the royal family who could enter the shrines.”

He did not wish to become a seed of war.

“That is agreeable,” I said. “We each have our own circumstances. No matter how extraordinary someone might be, I understand that some things are simply beyond the control of a single person.”

“Eglantine. Do you really agree with Quinta?” Mestionora asked, almost unable to believe her ears. “Is the world of men truly as he says?”

I stood up straight. Lord Ferdinand had warned me of the vast chasm that separated the worlds of men and the gods. He likely stood against Erwaermen and Mestionora because neither one of them understood our perspective as humans.

“My life so far has taught me the value of peace,” I said. “For the sake of avoiding another war, I consider the path Lord Ferdinand proposes more reliable than any other. His methods for obtaining what he desires might stand out for their intensity, but

the future he seeks is one of stability.”

“In your opinion as a human, is his path more reasonable than Myne’s?”

I thought about Lady Rozemyne for a moment. Though we had not spent much time together, many aspects of her mindset stood out to me.

“Lady Rozemyne does not enjoy war, but she is intensely self-centered,” I eventually replied. “Lord Ferdinand and I believe that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. We do what we must to preserve the greater peace. Lady Rozemyne, on the other hand, would go to dangerous lengths to protect those closest to her.”

A normal archduke candidate would not have invaded Ahrensbach and stolen its foundation for the sake of a single man. Considering the balance of power between duchies, the lives of the knights who had fought with her, and the social impact of the invasion, Lady Rozemyne would have minimized the death toll and secured a greater advantage by allowing Lord Ferdinand to perish, accepting reparations from Ahrensbach, and putting the royal family in her debt.

“Even while attending her Royal Academy lessons, Lady Rozemyne spoke of the library city she hoped to build, blind to the fact that her people would not share her obsession with books. She prioritizes her own desires more than the needs of society—mortal or divine—and would, as a result, make a far worse Zent than Lord Ferdinand. If she ever entered politics, those who refused to satisfy her lust would end up being swallowed and destroyed.”

I shot a glance at Lord Ferdinand. By taking advantage of a royal decree, he had secured his place as Lady Rozemyne’s fiancé. I hoped he would remain fully devoted to correcting her mad quest to obtain all that she desired.

Though, as one of her name-sworn, I will always be at the mercy of her whims.

“Eglantine, do you mean you can mediate between mankind and the gods?” Erwaermen asked.

I slowly shook my head, unable to say otherwise. “Because of my education, the ways of the gods have never once crossed my mind. But if preventing war between our worlds is my duty as a Zent, then that is what I shall strive to do.”

“Lady Eglantine, did you forget my warning?” Lord Ferdinand

asked with a glare.

I gave him a slight smile. "I appreciate your advice, but I must perform the duties expected of me. No longer am I the wife of a second prince who gave up his claim to the throne. I wish to become not someone who rules for lack of choice and relies on a magic tool but a true Zent recognized by the gods."

"Though your spirit is admirable," Erwaermen said, "the words of men cannot be trusted. You lie as easily as you breathe." He pointed to the sky above, and a beam of golden light came down. "Eglantine, will you repeat your declaration as a vow to the heavens?"

Erwaermen was prompting me to swear an oath to the Goddess of Light and her subordinates. I gave Lord Ferdinand a tired smile—he was openly bitter about the gods' interference—entered the golden light of my own volition, and then knelt before Erwaermen and the goddess hovering above his shoulder. I refused to let his harsh stare faze me.

"May all the gods be our witnesses."

I gazed up into the world of the gods, and the golden light seemed to sparkle more intensely. "As it stands, I am reliant on a magic tool, and my mana and prayer are both lacking. I shall do everything I can to remedy these shortcomings and become a true Zent. I hereby swear to circle every shrine, pray to the gods, and obtain my own Book of Mestionora."

The golden light enveloped me. It seemed to rush into my body and then disappeared.

"I, Mestionora, bear witness to this vow," the goddess said, her voice more soothing than before. I gazed up and saw she was wearing a gentle smile.

Erwaermen, too, looked more considerate. "The promise is made," he said. "I wish you luck in fulfilling it."

I bowed my head lower in response, still kneeling.

The New Aub's Awesome Magic

"Finally back, Jiffy? Good work out there."

"Yeah. Not a great haul today. I'm sure there used to be more fish in these parts."

I grabbed some branches from a nearby stack, threw them in my box, and then joined the circle of men relaxing by the port. We always got together after work to chat, drink, and cook the fish we hadn't been able to sell.

I dumped the branches beside me, turned my box over, and plopped down onto it. Then, using my trusty knife, I started shaving one of the branches into a skewer.

"Oy," I said. "Pass me one of them fish, will ya?"

"Catch." Not just one but three fish soared through the air toward me. "Cook 'em up and you can eat with us. It's nearly supptime. There's some salt over there, if ya need it."

"Ooh, thanks."

I rubbed some salt onto the fish, skewered them, and then held them over the fire. They always went nicely with some alcohol. I pulled the cup from my belt and held it out to Torem.

"Fill 'er up."

We all chipped in to buy the beer, so we could drink as much as we wanted. Right? Torem looked at the bottle in his hand, then at me, and grimaced.

"You sure, Jiffy? Heard you fightin' with your wife yesterday. Didn't sound pretty."

"Aah, don't mind that. She gave me an earful, sure, but hangin' out with you lot and sharing news is part of the job! Can't expect a landswoman to understand."

"Sounds like hogwash to me."

I wasn't the only fisherman whose wife and daughter complained about our little meetups. Anyone who thought the sea was a harsh mistress hadn't met our women! We cackled to each other and dismissed Torem's warning until, at last, he poured me a drink.

I drained my cup and belched. Work was so awful these days that a good swig of beer was the only thing keeping me going. My fish was cooking nicely—the skin was brown, the fat crackled, and juice ran down the skewer.

“So, who took the fish to the castle today?”

“Pretty sure it was Segt and Ank. Anything interesting happen?”

Once again, our topic of the day was the castle. Well, the new aub. She’d sent those arrogant foreigners packing and then closed the huge gate out at sea so they wouldn’t come back. She was young enough that her hair was still down, but that didn’t matter to us—she was a hero, through and through. Every time one of us went to the castle, we asked the chefs and servants for any new information about her.

The day after the foreigners were kicked out, a noble had sent us a request for extra fish, since some knights staying at the castle were eating through their entire stock. We’d given them as much as we could as thanks for their big rescue. Someone had told us since then that the aub loved eating fish, so we’d started sending her the best of whatever we caught each morning.

“Oh yeah, we got some big news this time. Straight from the court chef. Turns out the new aub likes ‘shioyaki.’”

“The heck is that? Doesn’t even sound like a real word.”

“Is it some kinda cookin’ method from her old duchy? Doesn’t tell us a thing about what kinda fish she likes. Get us somethin’ more useful next time!”

As rumor had it, the new aub was from another duchy to the north. Maybe that was why she liked fish cooked in strange ways. We all grimaced at the lack of any decent news, but Segt and Ank just looked at each other and cackled.

“Naw, get this—it’s just a fancy name for salted fish.”

“One of the chefs said she wanted some fish with good white meat.”

Everyone fell silent.

“Salted fish? Like, what we’re eatin’ now?” I gestured at my skewer, then turned it around to cook the other side of my fish. We fishermen ate this kinda food all the time—it only required two ingredients, both of which we got from the ocean—but it sounded way too simple for a noble.

“Yep. Didn’t believe the chefs, did we, Segt?”

“Nope. But they triple-checked with the noble who placed the

order, and it wasn't a mistake. Poor lot must've been sweatin' up a storm. Didn't even give 'em a chance to show the new aub their skills."

"So she eats her fish like we do? You've gotta be pullin' our legs. I thought nobles always covered their food with strange herbs or made it spicy enough to make their tongues go numb."

"Maybe she ain't too fond of spicy foreign food. Since she's from another duchy and all. Hand me that fish, will ya, Jiffy? That one's mine."

"She ignored all the fancy noble dishes and went straight for the salted fish. Feels... kinda nice, really."

I gave Ank his fish and chewed on what he'd told us while I downed the last of my beer. "She loves the fish we bring her and prefers our style of cookin' over that Lanzenave junk... I feel closer to her than ever."

"Same. The last aub had some screws loose, so I didn't care who took her place, but... I'm glad we got this new girl."

Couldn't blame him there. Our previous aub had also been young—barely of age—but she was a real piece of work.

"Anything's better than that other girl. The moment her ol' man died, all the rules started gettin' ignored."

"She showed those foreigners across the gate way too much favoritism and didn't make 'em leave when they were s'posed to. That's why the ocean's gettin' all cloudy and there ain't as many fish as there used to be."

"Eeh... I don't think that's the reason, but we've definitely had a fish problem since she came into power."

It was around the time the old archduke died and the foreigners' black-and-silver ships appeared that the fish started dying and the ocean lost its luster. Some merchants had made a killing from all the extra business with the foreigners, so maybe they'd preferred our previous aub, but we fishermen hated her guts. Our livelihoods were at stake.

"Those big ships blocked the port, and the guards let the foreigners be all sorts of violent. We couldn't even put 'em in their place without gettin' yelled at. It was insane."

"Not to mention those creeps were kidnappers too."

I remembered the evening we'd seen their wagons and carriages going to and from the port. The boxes they'd carried were huge, and we'd all assumed the foreigners were finally going home. We

had watched them from afar and enjoyed some beer, glad to see the back of them.

It wasn't until the following morning that we realized they were kidnappers.

We were fishing before sunrise when we noticed bound women in the wagons. They wore nice clothes, which told us they were either rich women or nobles, and were being carried into the foreigners' ships.

"They're nobles, ain't they?" one of my mates had asked. "This can't be good."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" another had cried. "If we don't do somethin', *we're* gonna get the blame!"

News spread through the fishermen, and our anger with the foreigners finally exploded.

"Quit wreckin' our port like you own the place!"

"We just wanna fish! Your ships are in the way!"

"Rescue the women! Attack the ships! There might be more!"

We quit our fishing and used our harpoons and nets to attack the foreigners. It was still dark out, so we hurt ourselves as much as we hurt our targets, but we weren't gonna stop once we'd picked a fight with them.

The new aub then showed up with a group of nobles. Some wore the purple capes we were used to, but others wore blue and yellow ones. They attacked the ship and settled our fight in the blink of an eye.

"At first, I thought *we* were in for it," I said.

"Yeah! Nearly soiled my trousers when they showed up. Didn't know if they were gonna thank us for saving the ladies or kill us for attackin' their precious trade partners."

Seeing the knights arrive had made us all nervous, but they'd immediately started attacking the foreigners and rescuing the kidnapped women.

"They smashed those huge ships with ease. We're nothin' compared to nobles, huh?"

"Don't forget what came next—the new aub froze the ocean with that huge light and closed the gate out at sea. She even went outta her way to heal us. It's a lot to take in, but one thing's clear: she's somethin' else."

The new aub used seasonal magic we'd never seen before. She was nothing like any of the nobles we knew.

“Never seen or heard of any other aubs healin’ commoners. She really is somethin’ else, ain’t she?”

Some green light had rained down on us, and all the cuts and bruises on my arms had vanished. They didn’t even hurt anymore. We’d seen some yellow light next, which one of the knights told us was a spell meant to protect the citizenry. He must’ve been right because the foreigners hadn’t been able to hurt us after that. I didn’t think I’d ever experience something like that again, but that was fine; I was just glad to know that the nobles saw us fishermen as worthy of protection.

“Well, it ain’t *all* good,” Segt complained, slumping his shoulders as he bit into his fish. “My old man finally retired, but that healin’ spell fixed up his leg. Now he won’t quit yakkin’ about gettin’ back to work.”

“Guess the old coot’s still got some fire in his belly!”

We all cackled. Segt’s old man had punched the foreigners with as much force as he put into yelling at kids who caused trouble on the water. Now that he was better, he and Segt were fighting about who owned their boat and who was the head of the family.

“No two aubs are the same, huh? She’s nothin’ like that blonde lass.”

The young blonde aub had come to the port once to watch the foreign ships leave. We hadn’t seen her there since, as she’d called us all eyesores and ordered us to stay home during her future visits. She’d even told us to moor our ships so far away that she wouldn’t be able to see them. I doubted that girl would have ever healed or protected us.

“Well, not everyone’s good at fishin’. Doesn’t surprise me that not everyone’s good at bein’ an aub. Just a shame that our last one was such a disaster.”

“Our lives are at stake! We can’t afford to have disasters in charge!”

“Yeah, and it sucked while we did.”

“Gossiping about the new aub again, huh?” a new voice called.

I turned and saw Furt. He wasn’t a fisherman but a shipmate on a merchant vessel that carried goods here and there. His most recent shipment had taken him up north; he must’ve just gotten back.

“Good news, then,” he said. “I saw the new aub doing some work up north!”

“Yeah?! What kinda work?!”

We all made room for him, excited to have any news about the aub. He passed around the fruit and alcohol he’d brought us as souvenirs, then turned over a box and sat with us. His cup was full of beer before he knew it.

“So, I went up to Kannawitz...” he began.

Kannawitz was a province bordering the ocean. The merchant ship Furt worked on would stop by several cities on its way north, buy local goods in Kannawitz, and then return south.

Furt continued, “We saw Lady Rozemyne and some others on their highbeasts while we were making our way back here.”

“Lady Rozemyne”? Is that the new aub’s name? How did ya find out?” It was rare for commoners to learn a noble’s name. Merchants allowed to visit noble estates and the castle might pick up a few, sure, but never fishermen like us.

Furt gave a proud smile and said, “Lemme get to that. Just like when she intervened in the fight, she was the only one riding a two-seater. She was carrying this big chalice-looking thing and pouring rainbow light down from the sky. It made the cloudy ocean turn clear in moments!”

“Furt, calm the heck down,” I said. “I’m not followin’ at all. You gotta explain what the rainbow light was. And don’t skimp on the details. Was it like that green healing magic? Or the yellow protective kind, maybe?”

“I dunno, but it was crazy. The seaweed grew so suddenly that the ocean changed color, and the fish too thin to be caught in nets became huge! I swear, all the fishermen nearby went nuts.”

“Huh?! ‘Course they went nuts! And you’re serious?!” I’d never heard of magic that could make fish grow like that.

“Yeah, I’m serious. They started cheering and waving at Lady Rozemyne, so guess what? She waved back! Everyone cheered again, and a guy from her group came over and told everyone to pray.”

“To... pray?”

“Yup. He said something like ‘Lady Rozemyne, the Divine Avatar of Mestionora, has become the aub of this land. Offer her your prayers! Praise be to Lady Rozemyne!’”

That reminded me—we were meant to pray during our baptism and coming-of-age. It must’ve been the same kind of prayer. Furt and the others in Kannawitz had apparently been so thrilled that

they'd done as they were asked without question, inspiring Lady Rozemyne to pour even more rainbow light into the province.

"That's nuts. Real nuts. But we're the ones taking fish to the castle, right?" I smacked a fist against my knee. "She should do somethin' about the water here!"

Furt crossed his arms. "You might not know this, since you only fish in close waters, but the land and ocean are way worse up north. People are starving there. Bindewald doesn't even have a giebe right now, so things there are absolute hell. Only makes sense she'd start with the north."

That was fair enough; I didn't know much about how the duchy was doing elsewhere. I wished she'd give us some attention too, but everyone all across the duchy was probably thinking the same thing.

"She's just starting with the worst spots," Furt said. "We can expect her back here soon. She won't abandon us, so we've just gotta wait our turn."

"Yeah... You're right." Something told me she'd come back, especially when she was doing so much for the sake of the duchy's commoners.

"Gotta admit, I'm looking forward to when she does return," Furt said. "We saw her go west in that weird rainbow thing."

"Huh? 'Weird rainbow thing'?"

"Well, we were curious. We wanted to know what Lady Rozemyne was gonna do next, so we moored at a nearby city and spoke to some of the farmers there. They told us she was staying in a huge rainbow house." He pointed, so I turned to look with a mouthful of cooked fish. "It was twice the size of that granary over there but had the head and tail of a feybeast. A creation of the gods, if ever I've seen one. Though it *was* pretty weird."

A rainbow granary with an animal head...? That just doesn't make sense.

"And get this—it *flew*."

"Furt, are ya losin' it?" I asked. "I get that you wanna make it sound cool, but enough already. Somethin' that big could never leave the ground."

"I'm being serious! You're gonna eat your words when she comes back this way."

"Yeah, whatever. Sure hope we see her again soon."

We were trying to calm Furt when we heard some banging.

Someone—from the soldiery or maybe one of the guilds—must have had an announcement to make. It usually meant the nobles had made some kind of unreasonable demand. Last time, it was a message to the fishermen telling us to leave the port before the foreigners arrived. It hadn't even been the usual trade period.

"What's goin' on?" I wondered. "Lady Rozemyne's still up north, ain't she?"

Were the nobles trying to do something while the new aub was away? We all stood, feeling anxious, and went to the plaza. Others stepped outside their homes to hear what the person causing the racket had to say.

"Urgent news from the castle," one of several soldiers announced. "Tonight, between sixth and seventh bell, the new aub plans to cast a large-scale spell to fill the entire duchy with mana at once. Do not be alarmed if the sky starts to light up. I repeat..."

In other words, we didn't need to do anything. I could see why the soldiers had warned us, but a spell wasn't really something to get worked up about. We went back to sitting by the port, feeling a little disappointed.

"Wonder what he meant by the sky lightin' up..." I said. "Is rainbow light gonna start rainin' down on us or somethin'?"

"He was probably referring to the rainbow thing I saw," Furt said. "You know, the big one with the face? Bet we're gonna see it."

"There you go again..." I sighed. "You're not gonna fool us."

"Gah! Just you wait! It's seriously the weirdest thing ever!"

We drank more and continued to chat before going our separate ways to watch whatever Lady Rozemyne's spell was gonna do. It was late enough that I'd normally be in bed—I rose before dawn on days I went fishing—but instead, I stood outside with my wife, Fina.

"If it'd stop you drinking so much, I'd want the aub to cast this spell every night," she said.

"Instead of goin' to the well, how 'bout we wait by the port? Furt told us a story 'bout this other province's ocean changin' color. I wanna see if ours changes too."

"Doubt you'd even notice when it's this dark out, but sure."

We passed the plaza where our neighbors were waiting and soon reached the street. Most people we saw were staring up at the sky in anticipation, while others headed to the mountains near the Noble's Quarter. It was like a festival. We heard a buzz of

excitement everywhere we went.

“Jiffy! Fina! Had the same idea, did ya?”

We arrived at the port to find a bunch of people gathered already. Fina saw the beer in their hands as they sat around the fire and pulled a face like she’d just swallowed dirt.

“What’s with you men?” she snapped. “Is drinking all you’re good at?”

“Now, now, Fina. Don’t get so mad,” Ank said. “It’s not every night that the aub does somethin’ for us. Come have a beer, why don’t ya? Jiffy—grab your wife a box to sit on.”

I nodded to Ank, who was waving his bottle around while trying to cheer up Fina, and went to fetch two boxes. We all drank and ate whatever food people brought from their homes while waiting for the spell to begin.

“Oh, I think it’s starting. There’s something bright over there.”

Fina pointed, and everyone followed her finger. Pale light stretched out from the castle, which sat much higher than the port and the rest of the city. I was starting to think it was larger than anything Furt had described when a burst of green shot up into the sky.

“*Green* light?!” I cried. “Furt, you said it was rainbow!”

We all turned and saw him frowning up at the sky. “Yeah, this ain’t what I saw...” he muttered. “I don’t see Lady Rozemyne *or* her knights...”

The green light moved as though it were alive. It went from the sky above the castle to the Noble’s Quarter and the lower city before shooting straight over our heads, drawing a stripe as it went.

“It’s goin’ toward the gate, right?”

“Is rainbow light gonna fall outta the green line?”

We watched and waited as the line headed west. A complex pattern soon started sprouting from it.

“It looks... kinda like lacework,” one of the women said.

“Mm-hmm,” another agreed. “Like one of those decorative fans them rich girls use.”

The other women seemed just as moved, and they kept saying how wonderful the design looked. We men were seeing exactly the same thing from exactly the same place, but we had something else on our minds.

“It’s impressive, but... it ain’t rainbow-colored.”

“This ain’t that big weird thing that you were tellin’ us about,

right? It is pretty huge, though.”

“I never said anything about a pattern!” Furt protested. “It was a huge granary-sized thing! It could move, soar through the air, and even had a strange head, remember?!”

“Furt, the heck did you even see?”

“That’s what I wanna know!” he shouted. “What was she doing in Kannawitz?!”

His confusion aside, the magic actually was kinda crazy. It continued west, then went north, and the pattern kept spreading. The announcement had told us to expect a large-scale spell, but this was even greater than any of us had imagined. We stared up at the green lines in awe.

“Attention citizens of Ahrensbach, soon to be called Alexandria. Can you hear me?”

“What the...?!” I almost jumped out of my skin. “Where’s that voice comin’ from?!” It belonged to a young man but seemed to be coming from some kinda device nearby. I’d never seen anything like it.

“I serve Lady Rozemyne, this duchy’s new aub,” the voice continued. “My lady created the magic circle now stretching across the sky to fill this barren duchy with mana. You are bearing witness to a spell dating back to the era of myth—one that can be performed only by the Divine Avatar of Mestionora. To receive the gods’ blessings, one must pray. And to best serve Alexandria, one must pray to Lady Rozemyne. Praise be to the gods!”

“Um... What?”

“It matters not whether you are a commoner or a noble,” the voice continued. “Everyone is taught to pray during their baptism and coming-of-age ceremony. Your zeal will determine the strength of the blessing that enriches this land. Pray to better your lives and to enrich the barren earth with mana. I shall say it again—praise be to the gods!”

We couldn’t even see this mystery speaker, but his intensity came through loud and clear. He wanted us to pray. We all stood, confused and a little overwhelmed.

“Well, if prayin’ will make the fish come back...” I muttered.

“I recognize this voice,” Furt said. “We heard this guy when we went north. He gave us the same instructions, so we all prayed on board our ship.”

Together, we went over the pose the priests had taught us in

the temple. “We’ve gotta raise our hands and right leg... right?”

“And you’ve gotta shout, ‘Praise be to the gods!’” Furt added, demonstrating for us.

I wasn’t convinced that praying would actually change things, but I couldn’t refuse to try. It was for the good of the duchy—or so we were being told—and we commoners would end up in more trouble than most if our land and ocean didn’t improve.

“Let us pray to Lady Rozemyne, the Divine Avatar of Mestionora!” the voice announced. “Praise be to the gods!”

“Praise be to the gods?”

We did our best, but it wasn’t good enough; the noble we couldn’t see immediately started criticizing us.

“That was insulting! Take this seriously! There is no divide between nobles and commoners when it comes to prayer! To all the nobles out there—you should understand just how much mana this spell demands and how much Lady Rozemyne is shaving down her life to cast it. Now, everyone, make your hearts one! Give a prayer befitting Lady Rozemyne’s magic!”

As it turned out, nobles were being forced to give this prayer too. I didn’t know who was leading the charge, but we imagined the looks on the nobles’ faces and cackled.

“Funny to think we’re all in the same boat.”

“Lady Rozemyne’s givin’ up some of her life to do somethin’ that even nobles find tough?”

An image of our new aub appeared in my mind—a young woman not even old enough to wear her hair up. She was from another duchy but hadn’t even hesitated to cast this spell for us. It was our duty as citizens to help out.

“Maybe we *weren’t* takin’ it seriously enough...” I said. “Let’s put our all into this next one.”

By the third prayer, we could hear shouting from outside the port. By the fourth, we were all competing to be the loudest, and our voices boomed to the point that it sounded like the whole city was praying.

“We’re getting there!” the leader of our prayer exclaimed. “One more! Let us pray to Lady Rozemyne, the Divine Avatar of Mestionora! The avatar of a goddess! Praise be to the gods!”

“Praise be to the gods!”

We prayed so passionately that the whole city seemed to shake, and that was when I saw the green light coming back toward us. It

had twisted all around the duchy and spread so far that there were barely any more gaps in the night sky.

“We’re so close! The circle’s connecting!”

The line returned to the castle, completing the magic circle, and a dazzling flash lit up the night sky. Green light rained down on the entire duchy as if the circle had started to crumble.

“Ooh! Praise be to the gods!”

We all cheered at once, maybe because praying together had united us. The voice coming from the strange device raved the entire time.

“We witness the revival of an ancient spell using divine mana from the gods! How glorious! Praise be to Lady Rozemyne! To our Divine Avatar of Mestionora! Everyone who prayed, behold your rejuvenated duchy and express your gratitude to your new aub!”

Those of us near the ocean peered down into the water, but my wife was right—it was too dark for us to notice any changes. Still, we had high hopes based on what Furt had seen in Kannawitz.

“Can’t wait for tomorrow. Let’s go get some sleep. Meet back here at dawn and we’ll check out the ocean together!”

As we rushed down the buzzing city streets on our way home, our wives teased us that we were all too excited to get any rest.

Morning came, and once again, Fina was right—I had barely slept a wink and woke up even earlier than usual. It was still dark out, but it wouldn’t be too long before the sun came up. I ran outside and raced down the steps, intending to pass right by the well, but I stopped in my tracks when something rustled under my feet.

“What the...?!”

There hadn’t been grass there the night before, but now it was tall enough to reach my shins. I crouched down and touched it. Even through my sandals, I could feel that the hard, dry earth had turned soft.

“Is this real...?” I murmured. “Man, if even the well changed this much, how’s the ocean gonna be?”

I continued rushing toward the port, excitement brewing in my chest. The sky seemed to get brighter with each step. I’d probably have an amazing view of the ocean by the time I reached the port.

Taking deep breaths, I ran through the alleys and turned sharp corners. I reached the main street, which led straight to the port,

and... stopped. Beyond white buildings and the white road, I saw a bright blue-green ocean. Even from this far away, I could tell the water was clear.

“No way... I’ve never seen the ocean like this.”

Only then did it occur to me just how dark and murky the water had been before. Ever since those black-and-silver boats had come through, the fish had started dying faster than ever, and the ocean had become especially clouded. I thought of all the days we’d set out to sea and come back empty-handed.

“This is how it used to be...” said a voice I immediately recognized.

I turned and saw Segt with his dad. They were heading to the port as well. We decided to make the rest of the journey together.

“Decided to let your old man set sail with ya, eh?” I asked Segt. I remembered their arguments over who owned their ship and whether his dad would return from retirement, but maybe they’d finally reached an agreement.

“I’m gettin’ me ship back,” Segt’s dad declared. “The aub fixed me up like it were nothin’! Gotta thank her by gettin’ her fish!”

“Huh?! I told ya *I’m* the one gettin’ her fish!” Segt complained. “You’re retired, old man! Stay outta this!”

So much for them reaching an agreement. It didn’t really matter to me which one of them took charge, but there was one thing I couldn’t let fly. I stretched my arms and then raced on ahead.

“Too bad, both of ya! *I’m* gonna get the aub her fish!”

“Huh?! Get back here, Jiffy!”

“We’ll straight’n this out later, son. Don’t let ’im win!”

We raced each other to the port, where we found other fishermen already trying to launch their boats. We must have been on the late side.

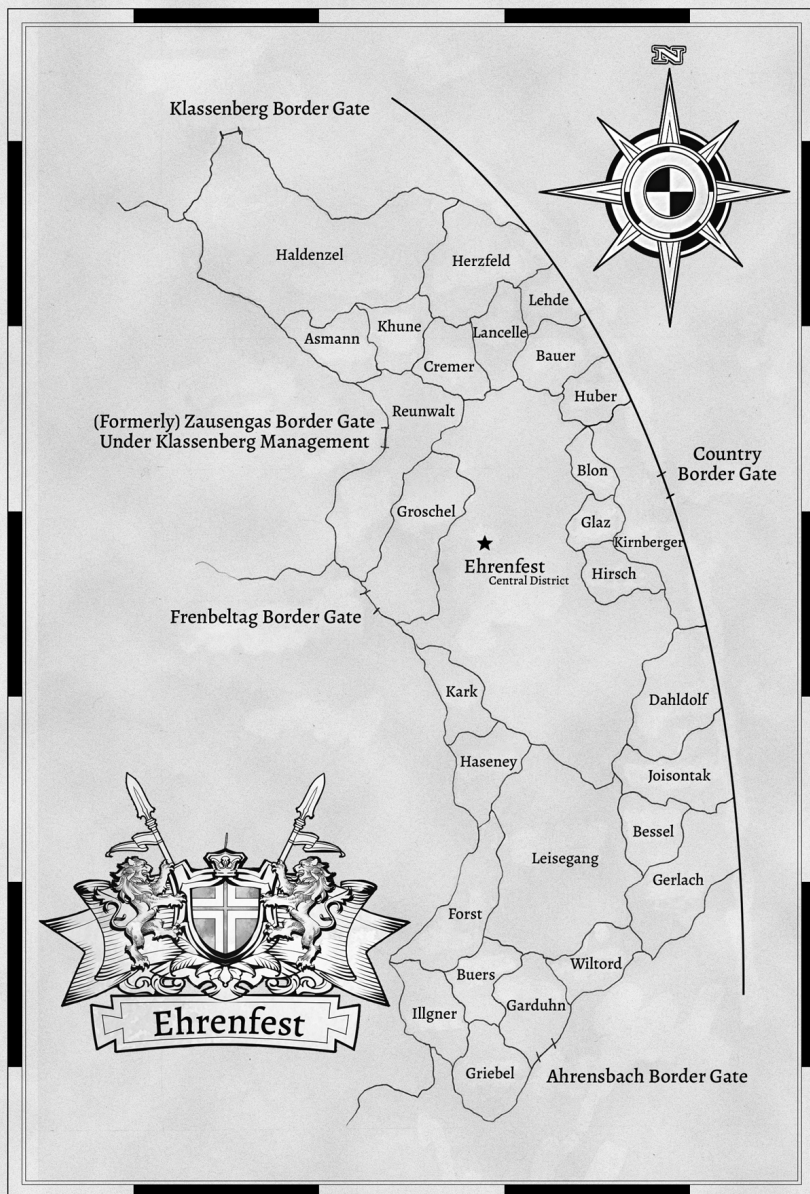
“Finally up an’ about, eh?” one of our mates teased us. “We’re goin’ on ahead. It’s a race to see who gets to thank Lady Rozemyne first!”

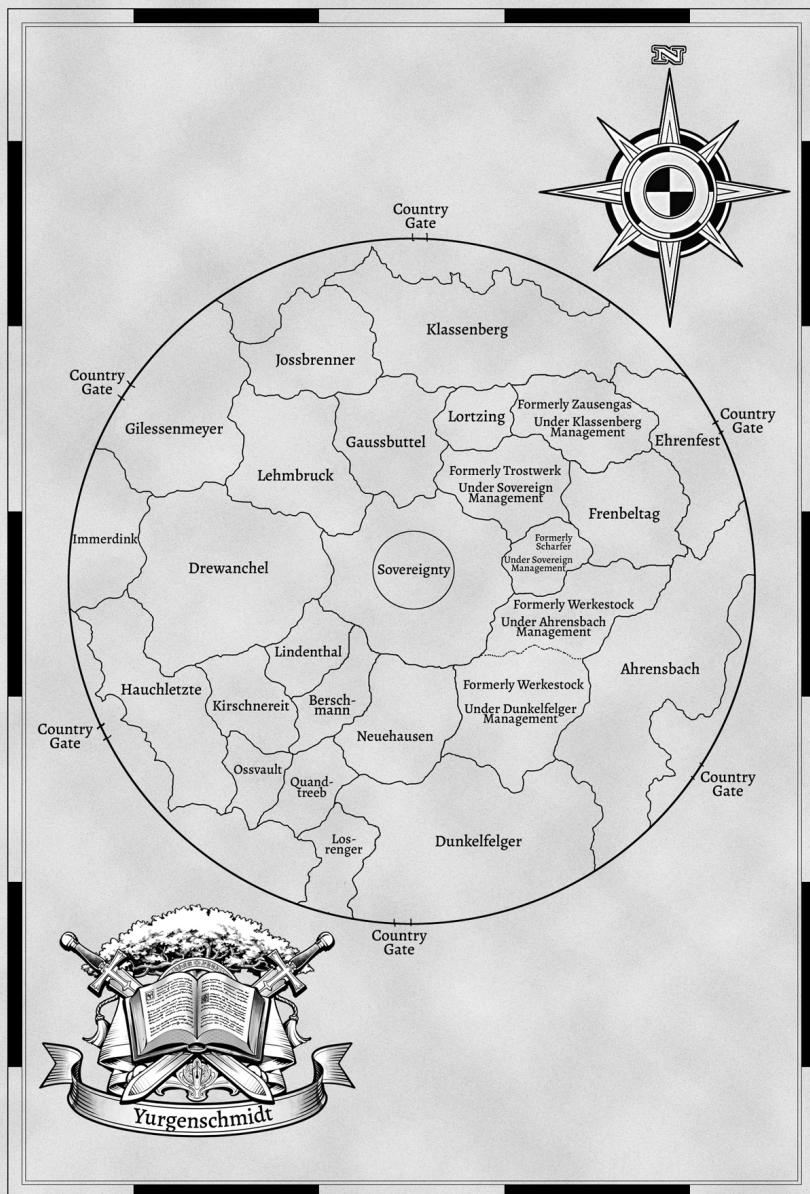
“Hoorah! Weigh anchor! Prepare to set out!”

“Praise be to Lady Rozemyne! Praise be to the gods!”

Fishermen launched their boats and sailed out onto the sparkling ocean. There were so many fish swimming around that we could see them with our own two eyes, and their glistening scales made for an even more wonderful sight.

I climbed aboard my own boat and set out as well.





Afterword

Hello again, it's Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading *Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 5 Volume 11*.

This time around, the prologue focused on Ferdinand and served as a continuation of the previous volume's main story. It describes how Rozemyne's retainers see the way she's changed and how Ferdinand saw the goddess's descent. I'm pleased to have managed to squeeze Lasfam in there as well.

As far as Rozemyne was concerned, the royals had failed to protect Yurgenschmidt's foundation by not participating in the battle at the Royal Academy. Sigiswald disagreed, as he believed the most important parts of the country to be the palace and the royal villas. It should come as no surprise that they ended up butting heads; they didn't understand each other at all.

The main points of this volume are the new Zent being chosen and the struggle to get rid of the gods' divine power, but Rozemyne seems most invested in the memories the goddess took from her. Unable to remember her family in the lower city, she starts to think and act like a genuine noble. Only a select few notice the changes in her attitude toward her family and others. How do they feel about it? For now, that's up to your imagination.

In this volume, I made sure to highlight the choices made by women. Rozemyne's influence was obvious with her rampaging around, but Eglantine and Adolphine, among others, also made important decisions of their own. The paths these women chose weren't all easy—especially by Yurgenschmidt's standards—but I wish them well on their journeys into the future.

This volume's epilogue was from Gretia's perspective. I packed it with insights into the struggles Rozemyne's attendants face while supporting her in Ahrensbach, Gretia's past and loyalty as someone who chose to give her name, and the reactions of her fellow retainers to the large-scale spell.

The extra side story was written from Hannelore's perspective. I hope you enjoy how mystical the transference ceremony appears to

all the nobles in the audience. It should serve as a pretty big contrast to Rozemyne's interpretation of the events.

In this volume's first original short story, Eglantine has a conversation with Anastasius and then attends the transference ceremony. Do enjoy seeing a part of the goddess's descent that Rozemyne was unable to witness.

The second short story focuses on Jiffy, an Ahrensbach fisherman. I tried to include how he and the other fishermen felt about the Purge of Lanzenave, the large-scale spell, and all the other changes their new aub brought about.

The cover art for this volume depicts the transference ceremony. There's Rozemyne in her ceremonial robes with the Goddess of Light's crown, Eglantine with the Grutrissheit, and Ferdinand with Gramps's branches and feystone.

The color illustration shows the large-scale spell performed in Rozemyne's new Alexandria. You can see Gretia from the epilogue in the center and the knights lined up. This is the first time Gretia and Laurenz have been shown in color. Shiina-sama—thank you very much.

And finally, my utmost thanks to everyone who read this book. May we meet again in the last installment: Part 5 Volume 12.

February 2023, Miya Kazuki

THE NOW FAMILIAR...
END OF VOLUME
BONUSES!

"If she meets her
demise, so, too,
will the world."

A COMFY LIFE WITH MY FAMILY

Art by You Shiina

DO. NOT. GET.
EMOTIONAL.
DO. NOT.
WASTE.
ENERGY.

LIFE
SURE IS
TENSE
THESE
DAYS!

GOT
IT...

THE NAME-SWORN

† THEIR FAMILY WILL MOVE TO THE
ROYAL ACADEMY AND SURVIVE ON
TAXES FROM THE DUCHIES. IF YOU
THINK THAT WON'T BE ENOUGH,
THEN FIND A WAY TO EARN SOME
EXTRA INCOME. I MANAGE IT,
SO YOU CAN TOO. †

LET
SLEEPING
DOGS
LIE

WE SHALL
DISSOLVE THE
ROYAL FAMILY
AND ENSURE
THAT NEW
ZENTS OBTAIN
THE BOOK OF
MESTIONORA.

LET US
RETURN
TO THE
METHODS
OF OLD.

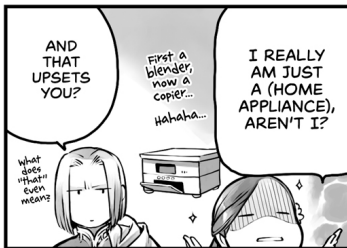
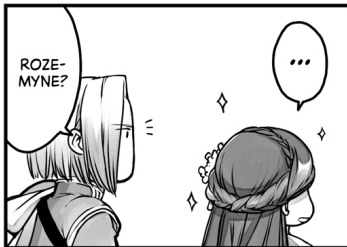
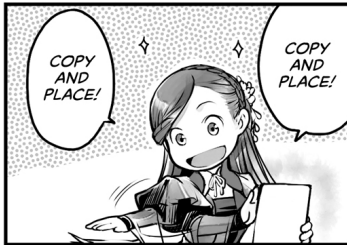
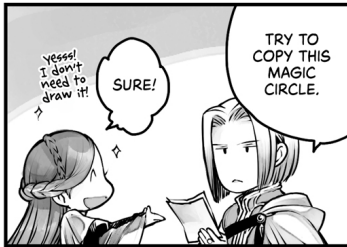
LET US
PRETEND
WE ARE NOT
INVOLVED.

IS OUR
DAUGHTER
ORDERING
AROUND
THE ROYAL
FAMILY?

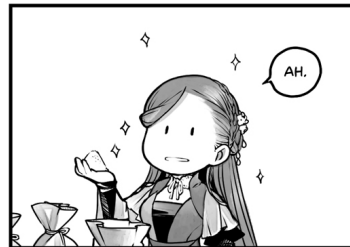
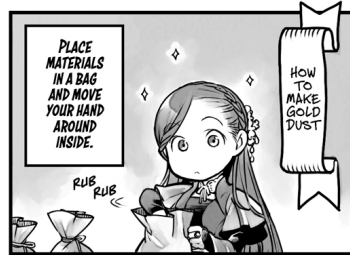
...AND THE ZENT, AS
ITS HIGH BISHOP, SHALL
SUPPLY THE COUNTRY
WITH THEIR MANA.

THE
SOVEREIGN
TEMPLE WILL
RETURN TO
THE HOLY
LAND...

COPIER



DUST FACTORY









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11 Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 5 Avatar of a Goddess Volume

by Miya Kazuki

Translated by quof

Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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